First Studies

A Home of Love: Reflections on My Journey with Jesuits at the Colombiere Center in Clarkson, Michigan

Taylr J. Bahr, SJ

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In the early months of 2024, during my first year of novitiate, and sent on hospital experiment to the Colombiere Center, Clarkston, Michigan, I had the true privilege of accompanying fellow Jesuits missioned to pray for the Church and the Society of Jesus. Soon afterward, upon my return to the novitiate, I read the summer edition of STUDIES, with articles by E. Edward Kinerk (UCS) and Joseph A. Tetlow (UCS), together proposing '*Orat Pro Eccl. et Soc.*,' the mission of 'praying for the church and the Society', to be a complex, life-giving, and essential mission among Ours.[1] Having just served at a Jesuit infirmary, I felt a personal connection to these articles.[2] They transported me immediately back to my recent experiences with Jesuits who have received this very mission and, more than this, inspired me to prepare this reflection.

In his article, "Praying for the Church and Society: Jesuit Beliefs and Practices," Tetlow suggests that the average American thinks little about her or his physical death, but often holds a mindset of denial, "turning the graveyard 'cities of the dead' into what look like golf cours-

[1] E. Edward Kinerk and Joseph A. Tetlow, "Orat Pro Eccl. Et Soc.: Reflections on an Essential Mission," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 56, no. 2 (Summer 2024).

[2] In more recent years, various titles and descriptions have been given, among Ours, for the official residences where members of the order are sent on mission to pray for the Church and the Society. In this reflection, for the sake of universal understanding, I apply the traditional title of infirmary, while leaving other terms, used by various cited authors, such as 'retirement homes', etc., to stand.

es," all the while making every effort to prolong life.[3] American Jesuits, he continues, not immune to these same attitudes, may need to be "stripped" of them and, though unlikely tempted to have their bodies "deep frozen," might still grapple seriously with the desire to "… use any therapy to put off our deaths." In other words, Tetlow recognizes that death is something American Jesuits, like all people, must prepare for, and ultimately embrace.

His words began to both inspire my prayer and connect to my experiences at the Colombiere Center. I began to ponder the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and it became all the more apparent to me that death is an inextricable part of life, and that, as Jesuits following our Lord, it is clear that He invites us to follow Him to the end, until death, our final step to new life. I then thought of the incredible experience of accompanying four Jesuits in their final days, namely: John F. Libens (1939–2024), Dennis T. Glasgow (1951–2024), Albert J. Fritsch (1933–2024), and Bradley M. Schaeffer (1949–2024), and how the life and death of each of these men, in one way or another, inspired me. I felt—and still feel—all Jesuits are thus called to, as it were, die well, not denying or ignoring our mortality, but, as all Christians, embracing it, as a part of our journey with God. Ultimately, and despite my age, all of this prayer, experience, reading, and reflection, together, led me to ponder my own death, and challenged me to ask: what will it mean for me to die well as a Jesuit?

To begin to answer this question for myself, and perhaps for some others, I bring my lived experience on experiment at the Colombiere Center to my still recent introduction to the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* and their *Complementary Norms*, drawing particular insight from part six, chapter four, which details help to be given to dying members of the Society and the suffrages offered after death.[4] In doing so, I arrive not at clear principles or directives, but rather three basic suppositions about dying well as a Jesuit. First, that the journey from life to death and

[3] Kinerk and Tetlow, "Orat Pro Eccl. Et Soc.," 41.

[4] Since most Jesuits, but with some exceptions to be sure, die in their elder years, I will reflect upon this question of dying well predominantly in the setting of the contemporary Jesuit infirmary.

new life for a Jesuit is, as it was throughout his life, a journey deeply rooted in both personal and communal prayer. Second, this journey is best made through, as it were, the doorway of a supportive and intentional community. And, finally that, along this journey, experiencing the grace of divine and fraternal love is essential. By way of certainty, I conclude that these suppositions share one important truth that roots them all, namely, love. To die well as a Jesuit is to die reaching out to God in love, being supported in love, and encircled by fraternal love.

I. Dying at Prayer

As a Jesuit reaches the latter years of his life, prayer itself, that ongoing conversation with God, becomes his primary and final mission, as he is assigned to pray unceasingly for the Church and the Society of Jesus.[5] Though perhaps limited by infirmity, each man is invited to rely on the strength of his love, his love for God and neighbor, that once propelled him through the mission field and now must principally reach out in prayer. This is not thought to be a weakness, but a new strength for the Society, and a new opportunity, for each man, to all the more grow in his religious life as he prepares to meet God, to die well. Interestingly, Tetlow suggests that Jesuits, in general, are not known for excellence in prayer, and yet, my limited experience has shown me that this makes prayer, as our final mission, all the more fitting, precisely because it is often something Jesuits may struggle with.[6] Being in formation myself, I understand more and more that formation, in certain ways, never ends, and prayer, no matter our age as Jesuits, is a gift that continues to develop. During my time at the Colombiere Center, I observed that many Jesuits had all the more deepened their ability to speak with God. Rather than relying on past mental and physical strengths that had seen them through years of apostolic activity—activity they had so naturally relied upon for some spiritual nourishment—new physical limitations, and deteriorations in health, seemed to open, in them, new opportunities

[5] *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus: A Critical Edition with the Complementary Norms*, ed. Barton T. Geger (Chestnut Hill, MA: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2024), 423, Complementary Norm 244.3.

[6] Kinerk and Tetlow, "Orat Pro Eccl. Et Soc.," 38. Tetlow notes exceptions to this claim including Baltasar Álvarez (1533–1580), Louis Lallement (1588–1635), and others.

to more intently hear God's voice in their lives, and to more fully turn to Him in all things. It seemed to be that, in fact, many of the men I met were, as a result, men of ever deepening love in God.

Prayer, in Jesuit infirmaries, as it is in all houses of the order, is prescribed, in the *Constitutions* and the *Complementary Norms*, to be, at times, communal and, other times individual, but my experience at the Columbiere Centre taught me that its practice takes many forms. For some men, their prayer manifested itself in more formal devotions and prayers, such as praying the rosary or the Liturgy of the Hours. Other men were content letting God look upon them before the Blessed Sacrament in the house oratory. Still others found great life in Eucharistic adoration. While, in the evenings, one Jesuit, would discretely sit and pray with companions experiencing extreme physical suffering. The important thing I learned is that there is usually not a clear so-called "right" or "wrong" way for those in the infirmary to pray, for each man's authentic prayer is equally grace-filled and good.

Albeit brief, and limited, for more than three years, I have been a Jesuit, and during that time observed that the often intense and broad obligations of apostolic life make scheduled common prayer difficult. Nevertheless, Tetlow explains how the "apostolic character" of the Society not only "permits" common prayer but essentially asks for it.[7] The highest form of this communal prayer, that prayer which brings such grace to our apostolic efforts, that brings us together to the truest presence of Christ with us, is, of course, the Eucharist.[8] Seeing men at the Colombiere Center gather for Eucharist, I witnessed, and experienced myself, a unity of hearts and minds, a communal dimension solidified and supported each day, making these men seem as "one companionship totally dedicated to Christ's mission in today's world."[9] This unity among brothers, as companions in the Lord, was something tangibly felt as the body and blood of Christ was shared. Despite their individual differences, they were one in the Lord. As if each man was drawn out of his individual self, and all his personal matters of health, as if dying

[7] Kinerk and Tetlow, "Orat Pro Eccl. Et Soc.," 56

[8] Kinerk and Tetlow, "Orat Pro Eccl. Et Soc.," 40.

[9] *CN* 227.1; ed. Geger, 418.

to self for his companions, I witnessed men finding Jesus in each other's preaching, earnestly offering the sign of peace to one another, and providing assistance to those among them with mobility issues. At communion, they witnessed to their communion with one another, and prayed and served one another.

During my time at the Colombiere Center, I observed that individual prayer was just as important to elderly Jesuits preparing to meet the Lord as any other form. The examination of conscience, held in the highest importance for Jesuits as an essential practice, contributing to discernment, purity of heart, and familiarity with God's workings throughout the day, was no less present among these men.[10] As in their earlier years of more active ministry, the Jesuits appeared faithful to praying the Examen, continuing to see God at work in their day, when they failed to notice Him, when they fell short in loving others, and where and how God may be personally calling them to greater love. Indeed, Tetlow suggests that, "Stripped of busyness, … [Jesuits] are challenged to know how simple, mild, and intimate 'God's will' has been all along."[11] It was apparent to me that many elderly Jesuits found in prayer that God simply desires for them to love and to be loved. By way of example, Albert J. Bischoff (1927–2025) naturally comes to mind as one of many men at the Colombiere Center who had an unmistakable love for God and his Jesuit brothers—a love fueled by a constant awareness of God's presence and care in and through an examined life of prayer.

Interestingly, Tetlow also makes brief reference to the old established Jesuit practice of pondering death, proposing that, from time to time, elderly Jesuits might try it.[12] This was, in fact, a refrain I heard from a few different men at the Colombiere Center. Contemplating final earthly moments, and the coming encounter with God, put life, for them, in perspective, and helped to reveal how much God has given. Moreover, this practice led to even deeper gratitude, often inspiring them to give in return, and to particularly give themselves generously to prayer. It appeared to me that in praying on one's death, and in turn,

[10] *CN* 229; ed. Geger, 419.

[11] Kinerk and Tetlow, "Orat Pro Eccl. Et Soc.," 52.

[12] Kinerk and Tetlow, "Orat Pro Eccl. Et Soc.," 41.

one's life, different Jesuits saw how good God has been and, even despite personal weakness, how undeservedly merciful and loving He is. This generosity in prayer, fed from the depths of personal prayer, for friends and benefactors, the dead and the living, along with all matters of the common good, is clearly something our founder desired of each of us, but never had I seen it so evident as among the elderly Jesuits I served.[13] Talking with the Lord about one's physical death, led many to a kind of freedom, then from freedom to gratitude, and from gratitude to deeper prayer for all God's labors.

Though I highlight here some forms of communal and personal prayer I shared in at the Colombiere Center, in practice, I feel there is no "right" way for a Jesuit to pray as he approaches the end of life. I hold this view since, it seems to me, each man I accompanied had a unique and beautiful prayer life, shaped by his personal relationship with our Lord. As Tetlow notes, each man's prayer, "… emerges in our retirement homes in conversations, homilies, and in the way that some sit for long periods in the chapel, attentive only to the gracious God who, we believe, founded our Society."[14] Or, as the *Complementary Norms* point out, the better prayer is the prayer in which God more abundantly communicates Himself.[15] This assertion is applied in the context of the elderly among Ours by the celebrated Jesuit André de Jaer (1925–2016) who recognized that, for a Jesuit near his death, "… praying with and for him in whatever way will be helpful …," is the better prayer.[16] At the Colombiere Center, when a man might have been especially struggling with his health, his Jesuit brothers would often pray especially for him at Mass. When my then superior, Bradley M. Schaeffer, or Brad, had a cardiac episode on Holy Thursday in the dining room, his Jesuit brother, Timothy P. Kesicki (UMI) wasted no time in putting together a simple, yet beautiful, prayer service, lifting Brad up to the Lord, as he later died that night. The so-called better prayer was, in other words, the prayer of greatest love that responded to the need of the moment.

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[13] *Constitutions.* 638; ed. Geger, 283.

[14] Kinerk and Tetlow, "Orat Pro Eccl. Et Soc.," 44.

[15] *CN* 225.2; ed. Geger, 418.

[16] André de Jaer, *Together for Mission: A Spiritual Reading of the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2001), 104.

All this being said, ultimately, like all things, prayer is a gift. It pours out from the heart, in an act of surrender, putting one's trust in divine love. Communion with God is not a result of one's physical or material condition, or even one's capacity to speak. In fact, I believe prayer can often be most profound when we find ourselves bereft of any resource and in a state of complete reliance on our Lord. Though one could argue that diminishing cognitive and physical faculties among elderly Jesuits seems to make any emphasis on their life of prayer less important, to do so, in my opinion, totally misses the mark. Elderly Jesuits, often being slowly stripped of their autonomy through the natural process of aging, are instead all the more left in the hands of God, letting Him hold them in a sacred communion. From my perspective, this communion was especially apparent among some of the men at the Colombiere Center struggling with memory loss or different levels of dementia. Despite these conditions, and facing real physical limitations, many of these Jesuits became visibly closer to Our Lord Jesus in His suffering, more reliant on the divine hand at work in the people around them, trusting God and His presence in their healthcare providers, activities director, and assistants, as well as their Jesuit brothers, thereby bringing to life the words of St. Paul, "the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings." [17]

Tetlow clearly states that the Jesuit infirmary is "… not a spirituality center or a residence for Jesuits working in various ministries," rather, it is a house of prayer, where each man is invited to pray according to the various customs of Ours.[18] In my experience, this idea of it being a house of prayer is not some abstract theory, but the reality. The Jesuits at the Colombiere Center fervently pray, in common and in private, aloud and in their hearts. They seek to examine their lives and to continue to grow in faith. They support one another by prayers, and they share each day, as they can, in the prayer for the world, which is the Eucharist. They pray for their brothers who have died and those alive celebrating a birthday. In these ways, and so many others, prayer for elderly Jesuits is a mission, rooted in love, and is a labor of love. My

[17] Rom. 8:26 (NABRE)

[18] Kinerk and Tetlow, "Orat Pro Eccl. Et Soc.," 55.

experience, at the Colombiere Center, therefore, emboldens me to take Tetlow's observation one step further, to say that the Jesuits assigned to pray for the Society and Church are invited to live together in a house of prayer, and a home of love, where each is, in prayer, drawn to deeper love, offered opportunity to give themselves in love, and prepare to pass on to God in love, who is love Himself. To me, this is a key supposition in dying well as a Jesuit.

II. Dying in Community

Love, we believe, "ought to show itself in deeds over and above words."[19] As an elderly Jesuit struggles with infirmity, and faces death, it is the manifestation of love and care, among his brothers and caregivers, in community, that I have seen offer enormous support. For most Jesuits in the United States, their community, when dying, is their local infirmary. Long before such facilities took their present form, however, it was identified that a dying Jesuit needs particular support. Often suffering physical illness, impaired mental health, and even attacks of the devil, the *Constitutions* stipulate that, "… the sick man needs help from fraternal charity."[20] Note here that the 'help' needed is 'fraternal charity'. Or, to put it another way, for the Jesuit to die well, amidst any infirmity of body or soul, he is prescribed brotherly love. This sacred balm I have experienced living in the community of the Colombiere Center, both in word and in deed, to the great benefit of all there.

In this sense, Tetlow wisely acknowledges that, if elderly Jesuits are to pray together as friends in ways that will last, they need "to learn to listen to one another."[21] Words shared do matter, and I discovered that meaningful conversations among the men at the Colombiere Center are a large part of building up fraternal love. I was told that, under the guidance of former provincial, David Fleming (1934–2011), efforts were made for the infirmary to truly be a community, with an authentic

[19] Ignatius of Loyola, The Spiritual Exercises, literal trans. in David L. Fleming, SJ, *Draw Me into Your Friendship: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading of the Spiritual Exercises* (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), §230.

[20] *Const.* 595; ed. Geger, 266.

[21] Kinerk and Tetlow, "Orat Pro Eccl. Et Soc.," 51.

community spirit, that together shape the daily lives of Jesuits and their various caregivers.[22] I witnessed men, of advanced age and experience, regularly participating in faith-sharing sessions, providing each man the opportunity to express how God was working in his life, how he might be struggling physically or spiritually, and how he felt invited by God to grow as a person. I witnessed the community gather in mutual support after the unexpected death of Brad Schaeffer, offering one another the sacred space to process and heal amidst the loss of a brother and superior. Finally, I witnessed older Jesuits, amidst their own infirmities, care for one another in ways as simple as picking up weekly activity cards from the tables in the dining hall and as profound as staying by the side of a dying brother.

At the Colombiere Center, I witnessed community in action and the intentional efforts to create a space of fraternal charity, or brotherly love, which provided elderly Jesuits the freedom to share their spiritual life, share in community activity, and be supported amidst their infirmities. For the Jesuit, authentic, real community is a community of Love, and it is that circle of love and support that I saw prepare the hearts and souls of Jesuits that approached death. Community life is, of course, an essential aspect of our Jesuit life, but, perhaps, all the more pressing at the end of life, when spiritual conversation, prayer, daily support and encouragement, regularity of life, and fraternity, make a home where a man best meets God, and is better disposed to die well.

III. Dying in Friendship with God and My Brothers

One of the simplest, yet most profound, examples I witnessed of true fraternity, or friendship, in the Society was at the breakfast table in the Colombiere Center. Each day, long-time friends would gather, reminisce, joke with one another and, informally, share life. Another such example, albeit more dramatic, are the wakes and funerals I attended of Jesuits who died during my time there. When living members of the

[22] David Fleming, SJ, *Living and Dying as Jesuits: A Missouri Province Statement* (Missouri Province Jesuits: 1984), 15.

community spoke of their recently deceased brothers, the term "best friend" was sometimes used, prayers were said, tears were shed, and words about the deceased were offered with what seemed to be a very genuine Christian Love. Attending these wakes often brought me great consolation, a sense of confirmation in my vocation, and even a vision of how I wanted to die as a Jesuit. The first memory, of morning breakfast, taught me how important friendship is in the last years of a Jesuit's life and, the second, at a wake or burial, showed me God's love. Intimate friendship with God and neighbor, or rather, God and brother Jesuit, seemed to me to be two clear realities that helped the Jesuits I knew to die well.

Each of us, in our different stages of Jesuit life, are on a unique and collective journey towards deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. At the Colombiere Center, I witnessed, however, an often-palpable grace, among many elderly Jesuits who, by their present circumstances, were uniting with Jesus Christ in profound ways. Tetlow puts words to my experience stating that, "retirement is being spiritually stripped" and "the reality is that now, in retirement, we are taken down to our truest identity."[23] He goes on to suggest that gone are the ideals of "the American male" thinking of himself wholly in terms of his 'job', position, or function.[24] This, of course, I have witnessed, journeying with elderly Jesuits who seem to all the more focus on their truest source of identity, their all, their Lord. The men at the breakfast table were not talking about work, but sharing life, and the priority for all before the coffin was that the dead Jesuit is loved by his friends on earth and in heaven, and through these friendships, grows closer to God.

What a profound reality, finding one's truest self as a man belonging to Jesus so often most fully as one approaches death. As a young Jesuit, I can be tempted to try and wrap up my self-knowledge and assert the intimacy of my relationship with the Lord, but reading Tetlow's words, and serving elderly Jesuits, I have come to understand that true interior freedom, and my relationship with Christ, is accomplished in God's time and not mine. Understanding my relationship with God,

[23] Kinerk and Tetlow, "Orat Pro Eccl. Et Soc.," 38.

[24] Kinerk and Tetlow, "Orat Pro Eccl. Et Soc.," 39.

in the Society of Jesus, is not an immediate, one-time revelation, but a deepening one, that often deepens and grows right up to the end of a Jesuit's life. This I understood more as I accompanied elderly Jesuits who faced, not only the loss of titles or roles, but of health. Tetlow writes of this too, citing the powerful example of our past general, and servant of God, Pedro Arrupe (1907-1991) who, reflecting on his own infirmities, declares that,

> "More than ever, I now find myself in the hands of God. This is what I wanted all my life from my youth. And this is still the one thing I want. But now there is a difference: the initiative is entirely with God. It is indeed a profound spiritual experience to know and feel myself so totally in his hands."[25]

Witnessing elderly Jesuits who, like Arrupe, have come to know and to feel themselves in the hands of God, in the hands of Love Himself, at the end of life was, for me, pivotal to my understanding of how a Jesuit can die well. Seeing the effects of infirmity was sometimes heart-wrenching, but seeing a man reach out to God with deeper freedom and love, inspiring.

Though we, as Jesuits, have no spouse, or children, to journey with through old age, infirmity, and death, I do believe we are blessed with both our relationship with the Lord and our brothers in the order. I think back again to those dear friends both around a breakfast table and then a coffin. At the Colombiere Center I witnessed, in many ways, the grace intimate friendships brought to Jesuits. It is not easy, as I was often told, to age, and elderly Jesuits, living together in an infirmary, seem to most benefit from a space that allows them to speak freely about both their bowel and spiritual movements, along with their thoughts, feelings and, perhaps, on occasion, their deaths. This profound and honest kind of friendship is perhaps best known when they feel "… a generous love for one and all…and are true brothers and friends in Christ."[26] A feeling

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[25] Pedro Arrupe, "Message to the Society of Jesus"; cited in GC 34, d. 6, no. 29; in *Jesuit Life and Mission Today: The Decrees and Accompanying Documents of the 31st-35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus*, ed. John W. Padberg (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2009), 568.

[26] *CN* 146.3; ed. Geger, 395.

of friendship that supports the elderly Jesuit, particularly as he faces death, and perhaps leaves him with the consolation that the Sufi poet, Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi (1207–1273), describes when he writes that, "Goodbyes are only for those who love with their eyes. For those who love with heart and soul, there is no such thing as separation."[27]

This sort of love—with heart and soul—is a mark of love in intimate friendship. This I have seen in my journey with elderly Jesuits and again, is perhaps most poignantly experienced by many of them in their last moments of life. There, and then, our tradition affirms the importance of intimate friendship, of brotherly love, in death. A doctor's care is to be assured, men assigned to sit alongside him offering encouragement, prayers are to be offered, sacraments administered and, after his passing on to God, masses said, and burial given.[28] Never left alone, feeling supported by the love of God and his brothers, the Jesuit, I believe, dies well.

Conclusion

Turning back to my question, 'what will it mean for me to die well as a Jesuit?', I affirm that it will indeed involve three suppositions, namely: while at prayer, supported by my community, and encircled by fraternal love. By no means yet a scholar of our history or our rule, these observations come from a heart and mind touched by profound experiences and informed by my intellectual effort to grow in a deeper knowledge of our *Constitutions* and *Complimentary Norms*. Serving in the infirmary, I witnessed, men at prayer. I witnessed men supporting each other, amidst their infirmities, as a community. I witnessed men, true brothers, finding often their truest selves, amidst joys and sufferings, in love and support they offered one another. In this space, this home of love, they fulfilled their mission of prayer for the Church and the Society of Jesus and grew, together, in readiness to meet the Lord face-to-face. Prayer, community, and fraternal love, these three propositions for our infirma-

[27] Alexander Brown, "Goodbyes Are Only for Those Who Love," *The Minds Journal*, published November 17, 2016, last updated November 4, 2024, https://themindsjournal.com/quotes/goodbyes-are-only-for-those-who-love-with-their-eyes/.

[28] *Const.* 595–598; ed. Geger, 266.

ries, are for me now aspirations, for when I, as a Jesuit, one day prepare to die well, that is, to die in love, in God.

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