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# EDITORIAL

## The *Ber* of the Matter

It may be perceived as somewhat peculiar by others, but for many Filipinos, Christmas season starts way ahead of the usual schedule as observed in other parts of the Christian and non-Christian (at least for the mere consumerist motivations) world. In fact this anticipated festive mood is unofficially inaugurated by the beginning of the “ber”-months, and continues until the first weeks of the New Year, as if to savor the atmosphere for the longest possible time.

It used to be a trivial thing of short-lived fascination for me, but the thought of exploring the teleological nature of the “ber”-months also brought me to some form of flimsy inquiry. Written sources indicate that the old Roman calendar began with March, and continued to the sixth month with names based on the agricultural cycle. The fact that the last four months of our present calendar end with a common suffix simply affirms the historical note that they were in the old calendar merely numbered, as can be realized from their etymological reference. However, no matter what the chronicles indicate, our present regard of the “ber”-months as “Christmas months” will always be an experience of encountering both realities of birth and death.

As early as September, Christmas carols resound on the airwaves; malls are seen partially introducing bits of decorations; and businesses promote profitable schemes to lure prospective clients into the festivity. People, on the other hand, are drawn into the induced euphoria, and get into the band-wagon of cheaper-when-done-early preparations for the celebration: homes slowly light up with the season’s lanterns; families

flock to the discount-markets for advanced gift purchase; and television networks begin their own versions of the Christmas countdown. This continuous domino-like sequence of events is suddenly brought into a standstill, however, towards the end of October, when the buoyant ambiance of looking forward to the commemoration of the birth of the Lord is abruptly replaced by a downcast disposition in anticipation of paying tribute to the dead. In adherence to the Church's commemoration of the faithful departed, November has been, to some extent, regarded as a month of momentary interruption to the festive journey to December that began in September. Even malls with the previously installed Christmas ornaments take great pains in donning their shops with Halloween motifs if only to accommodate the similarly popular observance. For a while, grief apparently takes the place of joy. It is like having to go to school on a day sandwiched between a national holiday and the weekend. It is like a brief spoilsport that dampens an otherwise unbroken cheerful mood.

Perhaps it is the reality of death that scares most people into a disposition that is devoid of rejoicing, such that the commemoration of the dead becomes an instance of sadness rather than happiness. Dying opens one's consciousness of the truth that earthly existence is not forever, that each will have to face one's mortality some day. This aversion to death becomes an unconscious impetus that prompts a person to prolong life, at times even at the expense of another. In fact, people at the brink of physical collapse can be so driven as to disregard another life in an effort to save one's own. Today, the Holy Father even had to remind those in the health-care profession to exercise caution in removing organs for transplant from dying donors who might not actually be dead yet. Thus, the recent call from Benedict XVI on the scientific community to find a new consensus to define when someone's life ends, a fundamental manifestation of the basic respect to each person's life.

We experience death everyday of our lives, in the same way that we also constantly experience birth. This is because change itself is a dynamic interplay of dying and birthing. The end of one thing becomes the beginning of another. However, dying may involve the end of something that has come to be valued in a profound way. That is why it is often hard to let go of what was, and move on to what is. With the consistency that change manifests itself in the world, one may at times reach a point when

too many new things become harder to adjust to, and one simply gets tired. A worse condition happens when one does not simply stop learning new things, but rather becomes resistant to all things new.

In a study conducted last year among American centenarians and published in a local paper, it was discovered that, for the majority of the 80,000 people who have reached a century of age, longevity did not depend on “clean” living, that is, without smoking or drinking alcohol. The so-called “secret” to their long life was that they kept abreast of the changing times. The respondents were found to be attuned to current events, the latest gadgets, and even with recent programs on the television. The Discovery Channel has already busted the myth that one cannot teach an old dog a new trick. For humans, this could actually mean survival, as the findings of the study prove.

But life is not simply a matter of reaching over a hundred in age. One’s ability to adapt to life’s changes contributes to a healthier disposition, because it makes allowances for openness to something not previously present in the same way. As Bob Dylan quips, *“He who is not busy being born is busy dying.”* When one continues to brood over what has long been gone, he will not have time to rejoice over the blessings that accompany the things that come. One may even be too preoccupied with evading death that he forgets to live. One can speak of a readiness to embrace the future only when one is able to welcome change, even that involving earthly existence. The same truth resonates in our life of faith, as the Holy Father articulates in his address, *“When a life is extinguished... we should not only see this as a biological factor which is exhausted or a biography which is ending, but indeed as a new birth and a renewed existence offered by the Risen One to those who did not deliberately oppose his Love. The earthly experience concludes with death, but through death full and definitive life beyond time unfolds for each one of us.”* It is not simply a matter of a starting point and an end point, but the journey in between. It is not the quantity measured by the number of years endured, but the quality of life enjoyed *to the full* (John 10:10). The *Ber* of the Matter is to remember – that death is not simply a matter of one’s bodily parts having to dismember, that birth is not just about having an additional family member, that life is more than surviving years in the most number.

Indeed, as the Bhagavad Gita says, *“For certain is death for the born and certain is birth for the dead; Therefore over the inevitable thou should not grieve.”* There is, according to George Santayana, no cure for birth and death, except to enjoy the interval. As the Scriptures affirm, *“All things have their season, and in their times all things pass under heaven... And I have found that nothing is better than for a man to rejoice in his work, and that this is his portion. For who shall bring him to know the things that shall be after him?”* (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 22) ■