

The Hour of Our Death

Father Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J.

“Watch, therefore; you do not know when the lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning. May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch!’”

(Mk 13: 35-36)

Most of us probably say the Hail Mary at least once a day. Lovers of the rosary say it at least fifty times a day. The prayer has two parts. In the first part, we quote words addressed to Mary in the Gospel – the words of the archangel Gabriel and the words of Mary’s cousin Elizabeth. “Hail, Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women,” Gabriel said. “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” were Elizabeth’s words to Mary, echoing in part the words of the archangel Gabriel. The second part of the prayer is the Church’s composition: first the archangel had spoken, and then Elizabeth; and now we speak. “Holy Mary, Mother of God.” “Mother of God”: this phrase represents a victory won at the Council of Ephesus in 431: if Mary were not the Mother of God, then Jesus Christ would be two persons. Then, we make our humble confession: “pray for us, sinners.” When? “Now and at the hour of our death.” We know with absolute certainty when “now” is; we do not know, we cannot know, when the hour of our death is.

And that is what Jesus warns us about in the passage we are meditating on. “You do not know when the lord of the house is coming... May he not come suddenly... What I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch.’” And “watch” is what we do: we anticipate the hour of our death each day – not out of fear, not out of morbid despondency, but in the calm certainty that, at some moment, the Lord of the house will come to us. Our prayer each day, our prayer to Mary, is the way we heed Christ’s warning: each time we say the Hail Mary we are living out his command: “Watch.”

Eternal God and Father, by the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, preserve us in your grace all the days of our lives and, at the hour of our death, bring us into everlasting joy, through Christ our Lord.