

Reprinted from 'Ave Maria' January 2006 issue, in turn reprinted from 'Totus Tuus' Bulletin July 1991

A Most Precious Time by Maria Baroness von Trapp (Sound of Music fame)

(There is a certain subject which many people will avoid, but which must surely be of interest to most. It is best described by the question: 'What is it like to die?' Some light may be thrown on this subject by a person who has come very, very close to death, but survived. Such a person was Maria, Baroness von Trapp, of 'The Sound of Music' movie, who described her near-death experience in her very interesting book, 'Yesterday and Today and Forever'. Her account, as follows, is given because it is thought that many of our readers will find it edifying and instructive: Editor of Ave Maria)

'I am most grateful now for a personal experience of my own some years ago: I almost died. I had been very sick, and now the end – as the doctor thought – had come.

'Never will I forget what it meant in that anxiety to receive the Last Sacraments. With what eagerness one searches every corner of one's soul in preparing for the last Confession. With what deep emotion one listens to the great 'Ego te absolve', which wipes out every sin. With what great longing one receives Our Lord in Holy Viaticum.

'One understands that time is running short, and only in time can we do anything for Him, so every moment is precious to express one's love and one's complete resignation to the will of the Father.

'But that is not all. Then comes the great and mysterious Sacrament with which our Holy Mother the Church prepares us to go to Heaven. That time when the priest anoints our senses with the holy oils, pronouncing the momentous words: 'Through this holy anointing and through His most tender mercy, may the Lord forgive you whatever you have sinned through the sense of sight; the sense of hearing; the sense of touch; the sense of taste, the sense of smell. Amen' and as the holy hands of the priest touch our eyes, our ears, our hands and feet, our lips and nose with the consecrated oil, the last stain of sin is removed. As the soul contemplates this, a deep peace descends on it.

'People don't realize how cruel they are in their wrongly understood 'consideration' when they keep the priest away as long as possible from their beloved sick, in order not to excite them. They don't know that they deprive their loved ones of the greatest consolation.

'Is any man sick among you?' writes St James the Apostle. 'Let him bring in the priests of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And prayer of faith shall save the sick man, and the Lord shall raise him up, and if he be in sins, they shall be forgiven him.'

'I was alone in the hospital in Vienna, my family, hundreds of miles away on a sailing holiday. As I lay there with my eyes closed, waiting for death, I heard the doctor say to the nurse that it wouldn't make any sense to try to contact the family. It was definitely too late for them to reach me. Although the doctor talked in a whisper, I could hear him clearly.

'All my senses seemed to merge and concentrate into the one sense of hearing. I noticed that while I was opening my eyes wide, I could see nothing, although it was ten o'clock in the morning. Sight was gone. I heard the rustle of the sheets as the nurse removed them from the foot of the bed, and I heard her hands gliding over my feet and her voice when she said, 'her feet are already cold,' but I couldn't feel it. Touch was gone.

'I heard the doctor say he would give me a camphor injection and I heard the click of the needle; and although camphor has such a strong odour, I didn't smell it. That was gone. 'Am I dying?' I wanted to ask, but I couldn't move, couldn't speak. And then hearing also stopped, and there was a silence, more intense than any silence I can remember.

‘The body might be helpless, but the soul was wide awake and in full possession of its faculties. Undisturbed by the outside, memory was keener than ever before. And in this anguish of the last agony, the soul passed once more through its past life, seeing everything so much more clearly.

‘Although nothing is to be seen, the soul senses very sharply the presence of a power which wants to influence it to give up; the sins are too many and too horrible to allow of any hope. But it also senses another spiritual power present. It may be the Guardian Angel, soothing the soul, reminding it: ‘If your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made as white as snow: If they be red as crimson, they shall be white as wool:’ reminding the soul of the bottomless mercy and love of the Heavenly Father, Whom it is to meet very soon now.

‘And then? Well, I did not die! But for the rest of my life I shall be grateful for those most precious moments.

‘The nurse told me afterwards, that for a little while they thought that I was already dead; and now I understand why Holy Mother the Church allows her priests to anoint a person up to four hours after the doctor has pronounced them dead, because obviously the very moment of death is a secret of God.

‘Afterwards, I found out that this seems to be a general experience. They say the senses die slowly, one by one. Therefore, we should take great care what is said and done in the presence of the dying. While they are fighting their last decisive battle, it would mean such a help if they could hear us talk to them about the Mercy of God, about having trust and confidence.

‘One day we shall have to take that same step, too. This might be the best preparation.’