

THE SEVEN
LAST WORDS
OF
OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST
ON THE CROSS

An Abridged Translation from the Latin of
ST. ROBERT BELLARMINE, S.J.

BY REV. ROBERT NASH, S.J.

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FOREWORD

The original of this little work was written by Cardinal Bellarmine towards the close of his life, when he had retired to the House of his Order at San Andrea. It was intended primarily for religious, but the thoughts it embodies should help many to follow the author in his faithful imitation of Christ Crucified.

In the attempt to give the gist of St. Robert's work in a few pages, much condensation and much omission was necessary. This will account, in some measure, for the abrupt transition of thought noticeable in a few places.

THE SEVEN LAST WORDS

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I

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

-LUKE XXIII, 34).

“And Jesus said: ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’.” How truly St. Paul spoke when he said Charity seeks not her own, is well exemplified by the order of Christ’s words on the Cross. For, of these words, three are spoken for the good of others; three have reference to Christ Himself; while a seventh refers equally to others and to Christ. Our Lord’s first care was for others; only after them does He pray for Himself.

Moreover, of those first three words which have reference to others, the first concerns His enemies; the second His friends; and the third His kinsfolk. He observes this order because Charity helps first those whose need is greatest-- Christ’s enemies in the present instance. We, who are Christ’s disciples, are thus schooled in the lesson of love for our enemies. That is why the Evangelist says, “And Jesus said . . .” This “and” shows us the precise moment at which Christ prayed for His enemies. It is as though we were told: “They were crucifying the Lord, and, under His eyes were dividing His garments among them. They were mocking Him, and clamouring against Him as a seducer and a liar. Our Saviour looked down at them. He heard their blasphemies; at that moment He was suffering excruciating torture from His hands and feet, which they had pierced so cruelly. And it was then that, returning good for evil, He cried out: ‘Father, forgive them.’”

“Father!” He does not say “God”, or “Lord”, because He knew that now there was needed, not the severity of a Judge, but the leniency of a Father. He must needs use the affectionate term “Father”, thus hoping to soften God’s anger, enkindled, as it would be, by such enormous crimes. “I, Thy Son”, He seems to say, “I, who am suffering, am ready to forgive; forgive, Thou also, O Father. For my sake, Thy Son’s sake, pardon this offence, even though these enemies of ours deserve not pardon. Extend to them the love of a Father, for, even though they be evil, they are yet Thy children.”

“Forgive!” Here is the epitome of the petition of God’s Son pleading the cause of His enemies

with His Father. It may refer either to the penalty due to their crimes, or to the actual sin they were perpetrating at that moment. In either case, the prayer was answered. For, for so heinous a crime, the Jews deserved instant punishment-- that fire should fall on them from heaven or that they be wiped off the face of the earth by the sword or by starvation. But instead of this, they were given forty years to repent and, to do penance, and, if they had done so, God would assuredly have received them back and restored them to His friendship.

In so far as Christ's prayer regarded the sin they were actually committing, it was also answered, because, through its merits, God gave to many the grace of compunction, and they returned home striking their breasts, and confessing with the Centurion: "Indeed, this was the Son of God."

"Forgive **them.**" Our Lord prays, in the first place, for the men who actually nailed Him to the Cross, and divided His garments amongst them; then for all those who were instrumental in bringing about His passion-- as Pilate who condemned Him; the mob who demanded His death; the Chief Priests who accused Him falsely; and, going back to the root cause of all His sufferings, Adam, the first man, and his posterity. But we also were among those very enemies, for the Apostle tells us that "when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son." So all of us, even before we were born, were included in that "Memento," so to call it, of that Holy Mass, offered by Christ, our great High Priest, on the Altar of the Cross. What return then, wilt thou make to the Lord, O my soul, for all that He hath done for thee, even before thou didst begin to exist? Learn to forgive thy enemies and to pray for them, and induce others, when thou canst, to do in like manner.

"They know not what they do." It is quite probable that Christ's crucifiers knew nothing, not only of His divinity, but even of His innocence. They were simply discharging a duty. Of many sinners who were not at Jerusalem that day, and of us who were non-existent, it could also be said truly that we knew not what was done. But if the words be taken as referring to those who were both present at Calvary and knew well that Christ was the Messiah, then all we can say is that He extenuates their guilt in the only way left Him. They blinded themselves to the truth, and though this blindness was voluntary, yet their sin would have been most grievous without it. So would Our Lord teach us His love for sinners. Though He knew quite well that His excuse for them was more specious than real, He does not hesitate to seize on it, as being the only one at hand. Gladly would He have offered a more reasonable one could He have discovered it.

In all this, we see Christ's intense affection for sinners. See Him hanging on the Cross. On His head He bears the Crown of Thorns so that He is unable, without agony, to rest that head against the Cross or move it to right or left. His hands and feet, fastened on as they are by the nails, are aching intensely. His Sacred Body, naked and exhausted by the scourging and all His long journeyings, is exposed to shame and to the cold. And yet, O Charity truly surpassing our knowledge, Thou despisest this as though Thou hadst nothing to suffer. Thy one anxiety is for the salvation of Thy enemies, and, in Thy eagerness to avert the danger that is hanging over them, Thou prayest: "Father, forgive them!" What more couldst Thou have done, if these were Thy friends, or Thy kindred, or Thy devoted children, not Thy enemies, not traitors, not children dealing murder on their Father? O loving Jesus, I see Thy Heart in the midst of the storms of so many injuries and sorrows, like a rock in the midst of the ocean, fiercely lashed on all sides by the waves, and itself remaining motionless and at peace.

Even greater does the love of Christ for sinners appear, when we rise from the consideration of His conduct as Man, and contemplate Him as God. "God so loved the world as to give His only-begotten Son." Now, the world is God's declared enemy, so that "if any man love the world, the charity of the Father is not in him." Hence, it was His enemy that God loved when He gave it His Son. And now God deigns to impel the world's Intercessor to return good for evil. He incites Christ to pray for His transgressors, and Christ is heard for His reverence. Here, indeed, is Charity surpassing all knowledge-- that the Father should so love the world as to give His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him may not perish, but may have life everlasting.

II

“Amen I say to thee, this day thou shalt be with Me in paradise.”

-(LUKE XXIII, 43)

“Amen, I say to thee, this day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise.” Our Lord spoke this second word when the two thieves had been crucified with Him, one on the right and one on the left, and the one on the left was adding to his former sins by blaspheming Christ: “If Thou be Christ, save Thyself and us.” But he was quickly silenced by the Good Thief, who was hanging on Christ’s right. “Neither dost thou fear God,” he said, “seeing thou art under the same condemnation? And we, indeed, justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds, but this Man hath done no evil.” Grace shines clearer in the heart of the thief, and he turns to Our Lord with: “Lord, remember me when Thou shalt come into Thy Kingdom.” How can we admire sufficiently the grace of the Holy Spirit, enlightening the mind of this poor robber? Peter, the Apostle, denies His Master; this robber, hanging on the Cross, confesses Him before the eyes of the whole world. On the road to Emmaus, His own disciples told Him despairingly: “We were hoping!”, but here is the robber speaking with fullest confidence. Thomas, another Apostle, stoutly refused to believe Christ’s Resurrection, unless he saw Him and touched Him; this thief, hanging on the cross, sees a crucified criminal, and recognises an immortal King.

“Lord!” Thus he confesses himself a servant, a slave even, who had been purchased by the Blood of Christ. “Remember me.” He asks nothing in particular, just as though he would say: “If Thou wilt but deign to remember me, to cast upon me Thine eyes of mercy, I shall have all I want, for I know Thy power and Thy wisdom, and have full confidence in Thy loving charity.” And he finishes his prayer with “when Thou, comest into Thy Kingdom,” showing that his desires were raised far above all perishable and transitory things, and that his aspirations tended only to the never-ending joys of heaven. And now let us listen to Christ’s answer: “Amen, I say to thee, this day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise.” “Amen” on the lips of Our Lord is a most solemn assurance which He was wont to employ whenever He wished to stress the serious nature of His utterance. He spoke now in this way, because the thief, unless he had this assurance, might have doubted Christ’s promise, and that for three reasons. For, in the first place, who could easily believe that a robber would be translated from a cross of shame into the Kingdom of heaven? Or that Christ, who at that moment seemed reduced to the extremity of infirmity and want, who during His life had been able to do nothing for His friends, could, in death, be in a position to hand over to anyone a Kingdom? Lastly, the thief might have doubted because of what was promised-- Paradise. For these three, reasons, then, Our Lord introduces His promise with the solemn word, “Amen.”

“This day.” This very day, before the sun sets, thou shalt pass with Me from the sufferings of the Cross to the delights of Paradise. “Thou shalt be with Me.” Even though Our Lord had promised no more, the thief would have been amply rewarded. “For with Him,” says St. Augustine, “where could there be aught of evil, and where aught of good without Him?” “In Paradise.” After Our Lord’s death, His body was buried in the sepulchre and His soul descended into Limbo. No one affirms that either the sepulchre or Limbo could be called Paradise, for that is a word signifying “a garden of delights.” Hence, we interpret it here as the beatitude of the soul of man, which consists in the face to face vision of God. So the promise would imply: “This day thou art with Me on the Cross. Already I am in Paradise, at least in the higher part of my soul, for I see the face of My Father. But soon, very soon, even this day, thou shalt be with Me in Paradise-- freed from the pains of the Cross, and enriched with the joys of the Beatific Vision.”

Consider, O my soul, the boundless mercy and liberality of Thy Redeemer. Laden as He was with sorrows, He might well have refused to listen to the petition of a thief, but His charity chooses

rather to be unmindful of His own bitter pains than to be deaf to the prayer of a poor sinner. And what shall we say of His liberality? He has received from the thief a few kind words. These He repays by blotting out all the sins of his life, and making him a guest in the company of His Patriarchs and Prophets. “Good measure, pressed down, shaken together and flowing over!”-- this is the measure of Christ’s reward.

See here, too, the power of the grace of God. In the Good Thief, behold a man who would seem to be standing on the brink of Hell, at the close of a life of sin. Him the grace of God singles out, shedding its rays into his soul. At once there is a change. He confesses that Christ is a King; he exhorts his companion to repentance; he commends his own needs to Christ with all earnestness and humility. But the second thief remains obdurate. In spite of the tender prayer of Christ, in spite of the urgings of his companion, in spite of the wonderful darkness and the bursting forth of the rocks, he remains hardened in sin, and dies unrepentant. How great then is the rashness of those who live for even a single day in mortal sin, seeing that at any moment, the Hand of Death may snatch us from life!

There are three Crosses on Calvary-- the Cross of Christ, always innocent, always eminent for holiness; the Cross of a sinner who repented his sin; and the Cross of the sinner who died in his sins. Our place must be with one of these, and innocent, repentant, or obdurate, we have to learn that in life here, there is no escape from the Cross.

III

“Woman, behold thy son.... Behold thy mother.”

(JOHN XIX, 26, 27)

“Now there stood by the Cross of Jesus, His Mother,” writes the Evangelist, “and His Mother’s sister, Mary of Cleophas; and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus, therefore, had seen His Mother and the disciple standing, whom He loved, He saith to His Mother: ‘Woman, behold thy son.’ After that He saith to the disciple: ‘Behold thy Mother.’ And from that hour, the disciple took her to his own.”

Happy privilege for that disciple! For surely, St. John received the hundredfold promised to those who leave all things for Christ’s sake. The mother he had left was the wife of a poor fisherman; he received instead the Mother of the Creator, the Mistress of the Universe, she who, full of grace and blessed among women, was soon to be taken up to the kingdom of heaven and exalted above the choirs of angels.

In this scene we have a striking example of Our Lord’s eagerness to suffer. Not satisfied with His own most bitter Passion, abounding as it was in sorrow and shame, He willed to have also beside His Cross, His blessed Mother and His beloved disciple. Thus, did He double the sorrows of His own Passion by making Himself a willing victim of the grief of those He loved so ardently. He was pained by the consciousness of pain inflicted by Him on them; their tears caused Him suffering not less great than was caused by the shedding of His own Blood. “The sorrows of death have surrounded Me,” I seem to hear Him say. “The sword foretold by Simeon, which is now passing through the soul of My most innocent Mother and causing her the keenest anguish, reached into My Heart, too, already well-nigh broken with grief. O bitter Death! Is it thus that, not satisfied with separating My soul from My blood, thou wilt also tear a Mother from her Child, and such a Mother from such a Child! My love for her forbids Me to call her ‘Mother.’ All I can say is: **‘Woman, behold thy son.’**”

And in the face of all this outpouring of love, we satisfy ourselves with reading over casually an account of Our Saviour’s Passion, or listening to a short discourse on it. We have to do more-- we must choose out times and places suitable for deep meditation, and hearken to the invitation of the prophet: “O all ye who pass by the way, attend and see if there be any sorrow like unto My sorrow.” “Think **diligently**,” writes St. Paul, “upon Him that endured such opposition from sinners against Himself, that you be not wearied, fainting in your minds.”

The three women who stood by Our Lord's Cross may be taken as three types of His servants. For Mary Magdalene is the repentant sinner, the beginner in God's service; Mary of Cleophas stands for those who are retaking progress; while Our Blessed Lady represents those who are already perfect. And all three classes have need of the assistance of the Crucified. Repentant sinners must be helped by the Crucified in the struggle against their vices and concupiscences. What will sustain them better than the example of Christ their Leader, who did battle with that ancient serpent and refused to come down from the Cross till He had completely vanquished him? Mary of Cleophas was a married woman, the mother of two sons who were called the brothers of the Lord. Those advancing in God's service have, too, need of the Cross, lest the good seed of Christ's word be choked in them, and they bring forth no fruit. For Our Saviour was not satisfied with all the good works He had done in His life, but willed to advance to still greater, refusing to come down from His Cross till He had conquered and routed the enemy. And, lastly, those who have reached a high degree of perfection, following close in the footsteps of Mary their model, these, too, must keep close to the Cross, lest the edifice they have raised, be not built up on the solid rock of humility. What greater humility can be conceived than that Omnipotence should permit itself to be put in bonds and fastened to a Cross? We must needs be hard to teach if we look at the Crucified and do not recognise that we are still a long way from true humility.

A last word about this incident of the drama of Calvary. Christ spoke not only to St. John, but to all of us. To us, too, He says of Mary: "Behold your Mother"; and He presents each of us to her with: "Mother, behold your son." What, temptation can prevail, what sorrow cast us down, if we have Mary, the Mother of Christ, for our Mother? In every age Mary's name has evoked tributes of enthusiasm and love and trust from those who had come to regard her as a Mother indeed. One citation must suffice. Let it be that eloquent passage of St. Bernard, every word of which is throbbing with filial affection for his Mother Mary. "O whatsoever thou seest," he writes, "that findest thyself tossed about by storms, and tempests amidst the whirlpools of this life, rather than walking on the firm ground, turn not away thine eyes from the light of this Star, unless thou wishest the tempest to engulf thee. Do the winds of temptation rise up against thee? Dost thou dash against the rock of tribulation? Look at the Star. Call upon Mary. Or mayhap there break in over thee the waves of pride and ambition, or thou floatest about amid the billows of slander and jealousy? Look at the Star. Call upon Mary. If thou art cast down at the enormity of thy sins, if confused at the foul state of thy conscience, if, terrified by the remembrance of thy awful judge, thou art threatened with being swallowed up by the gulf of sorrow or the abyss of despair, then, indeed, must thou think on Mary. In dangers, in perplexities, in doubts, think on Mary, call upon Mary. Follow Mary and thou wilt not go astray; pray to Mary and thou wilt never despair; think upon Mary and thou wilt not wander from the right path.... My little children, Mary is the ladder by which sinners mount up to God. Mary is my greatest confidence. Mary is the whole ground of my hope."

IV

"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

(MATT. XXVII, 46)

The first three words were spoken by Our Lord about the sixth hour, shortly after He had been nailed to the Cross. The remaining four were uttered after there had been darkness and silence for three hours, when Christ was on the point of death.

"Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over the whole earth until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice: '*Eli, Eli, lamma sabacthani?*' that is, 'My God,

My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" Here Our Lord complains that He has been abandoned by His Father, and He makes His complaint in a loud voice. Both these facts require a few words of comment.

How could Christ be conceived as being abandoned by His Father? "The Father spared not His own Son," writes St. Paul, "but delivered Him up for us all." It would seem then that the Father withdrew His protecting Hand from over His Divine Son; that He did so is, indeed, obvious, and this appears to us the most satisfactory explanation of the dereliction of Calvary. The Father could have hindered the Passion of Son, and the Son Himself, as God, could have prevented the sufferings of His Body. But a temporary victory over Christ was permitted to the powers of darkness. "This is your hour," Our Lord had said, "and the powers of darkness."

Our Lord speaks in a loud voice to teach us how great a price He paid for our Redemption. For, until now, He had borne all His sufferings with such incredible patience and such astonishing tranquility, that one might almost imagine He was devoid of sensation. He had uttered no word of complaint against the accusation of the Jews; He had listened in silence to Pilate's unjust condemnation; not a groan had escaped Him, not the smallest cry, not the least indication of the torture He endured, when the soldiers were nailing Him to the Cross. But now that He is at the point of death, He would have all men know the agony His Passion had caused Him. "My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" They are not words of accusation; they betray no indignation; they are not a complaint; they are words uttered merely with the object of making known to us, at a most apposite moment, the overwhelming sufferings of Our Saviour's Passion.

Here Our Lord teaches us to love a life of penance and toil and to hold ourselves aloof from the delights and consolations of earth. For we see Him here drinking to the dregs the Chalice of His Passion. He remained on the Cross, not only the full three hours decreed by His Father, but even longer; for He was nailed to the Cross before the sixth hour, and He did not expire till after the ninth. Eternal happiness might well be purchased by us by a life of unremitting toil; what then is to be said of those men who spend their days in idleness, or, what is worse, in drawing down God's anger on themselves by living in mortal sin? Against them stands the example of Jesus Christ, who not only fulfills the time appointed Him to suffer, but even prolongs it. Against them arise the Apostles, the Martyrs, the Confessors, the Virgins, and all who have ever attained to true sanctity-- with one voice all these proclaim that, not by many delights, but "through many tribulations, we must enter the Kingdom of heaven."

And now, I ask thee, O my soul, how, thinkest thou, did thy Master employ Himself during those three hours of darkness? "Do Thou, O Lord, to whom this is known, do Thou instruct us." "Never, my Child, during the whole course of My mortal life, which was nothing but a series of sufferings, never during it all did I undergo greater anguish than during those three hours. During that time My naked Body suffered from the intense cold, and the darkness in some manner, compelled Me to think more of the pains of My Body. Not for three hours, but for three years, did I seem to hang there. Still, as often as I thought of My Father's honour, and your salvation, My desire to suffer was again increased, and these three hours then seemed but three short moments."

"Lord, when we are overtaken with sorrow, or when any part of our body is racked with pain, it is only with the greatest difficulty that we can raise our minds to Thee in prayer. Didst Thou pray during those hours of darkness?" "Indeed, the wounds of My Body, and they were not few, all became as so many mouths beseeching the Father for you, and every drop of My Blood was made a tongue to employ all its eloquence in imploring mercy for you, from My Father and your Father." "And I, Lord, when I come before Thee to pray, and am weary with labour or pressed down by sorrow, I can scarcely fix my thoughts on Thee to ask Thee for my necessities. Have mercy, O Lord, on Thy servant, according to Thy great mercy."

Five reasons may be assigned for the dereliction of Christ by His Father. There was, first, the enormous multitude of sins He had undertaken to expiate. As these crimes were well-nigh infinite, infinite too, would be the reparation offered. While it is true, of course, that the smallest act of Christ

was infinite in value, still, He willed to suffer torments which would be infinite even in number, in so far as this was possible. In this spirit He added to the rest of His pains this terrific dereliction by His Father. Besides, He would give us an insight into the miseries of souls that are lost. Their principle torture is the pain of loss-- they are devoured by a longing to see God, whom they now realize is the only good; but for all eternity this yearning will be frustrated. From this terrible dereliction, too, we can guess at the value of that pearl of great price-- the possession of heaven-- which He judged worthy to be bought so dearly. And this dereliction is the culmination of Christ's victory over Death.

But above all these reasons stands His intense love for the Father. He wished to make the fullest satisfaction to His Father's offended Majesty, and this could be done only by the Son suffering all that was possible. Thus, this abandonment shows His eagerness to atone in the fullest manner for the outrage committed against the Father's honour by us sinners.

So if you ask me why God forsook His Son at the hour of His death, I answer that He wished to make us realize the heinous nature of sin; the miseries of hell; the joys of heaven; the glory of His victory over death; and the strong tie of love that bound Christ to His heavenly Father.

V

“I thirst!”

(JOHN XIX, 28).

“Afterwards Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said: ‘I thirst.’” Our Lord wished to fulfill all the prophecies that had been made concerning His life and death. All these had now been fulfilled except that He should drink vinegar in His thirst. “In My thirst they gave Me vinegar to drink.” And, so, crying out with a loud voice, He said: “I thirst.”

From the beginning of His crucifixion, Our Saviour had to endure a burning thirst. All the blood He had lost had quite parched His throat, and after He had been nailed to the Cross, He bore in His Body four flowing streams from which that Precious Blood began to issue forth anew. But for three long hours He had borne this agonising thirst, without a murmur, and it is only now, when He is on the point of death that we hear Him complain: ‘I thirst.’ Thus, He would teach us that He suffered this thirst, indeed, for, had He remained silent about it, we would, perhaps, have doubted whether He really did endure it. Therefore He said: ‘I thirst.’ “Every particle of My flesh is racked; every drop of My Blood has been shed; My mouth is dried and hardened: My throat is parched. If there be any who wishes to comfort Me, let him give Me to drink.”

“There was set there a vessel of vinegar. And they, putting a sponge full of vinegar about hyssop, put it to His mouth.” What was the drink He sought in His thirst? What comfort did He ask for? What but the salvation of men's souls, for which He thirsted, and to win which He was dying on Calvary? “I looked for one that would grieve together with Me,” says the Psalmist, “and there was none, and for one that would comfort Me, and I found none.” In His thirst, He was given vinegar and gall-- the bitterness of the vinegar typifying men's obstinacy in sin; and the gall symbolising sin itself, than which nothing is more distasteful to a man who understands its nature. Peter had denied his Master; Judas had fallen into despair; all the Apostles had fled from Him; the thief by His side had blasphemed Him, and in all these Our Saviour saw types of the thousands who would deny Him, or reject Him throughout the ages.

Do you wish, then, to refresh the thirst of Our Saviour? Offer Him a penitent heart, and a sincere hatred of your sins. Then conceive great sorrow with Christ in His sorrow for the loss of so

many souls, all of whom might be saved, if they would but use aright the fruits of the Redemption. What must He say now, when He looks, not from the Cross, but from the height of heaven, and sees all His sufferings set at nought, and His Precious Blood trampled under foot, even by men who believe in Him, or at least profess to believe? When even they offer Him nothing to drink but vinegar and gall? It is true that there is joy in heaven over one sinner that doth penance; but if he who seemed to be born again by faith and baptism should die a second time by mortal sin, will not this joy be changed into sorrow? A woman while she is in labour hath sorrow, but if she bring forth her child alive, she no longer remembers her anguish, because a man is born into the world. But if her child should presently die after birth, will not the mother be torn by a double grief?

As Our Saviour looks down from His Cross out over the face of the globe, He sees multitudes of men who are devoured by burning thirst. And to them He says: "I thirst, I thirst to make you know by faith, that I am the true fountain of living water, and that in My love alone can your thirst be assuaged." See how so many are consumed by the thirst of concupiscence? They rush after riches and honours, waters that are quickly flowing past them and which, when tasted, leave only disquiet in the soul. But who ever drank of the fountains of the Saviour and did not soon lose all thirst for the joys of earth? "All you that thirst," says Isaias, "come to the waters. Make haste... Come ye, buy wine and milk without money and without any price." Thus, Our Saviour, as a living fountain whose waters never cease to flow, has so moistened the soil of our hearts, that we need never again fear it will become hardened, unless we, of our own accord, yield to the suggestions of the Evil One.

The virtue of Penance is especially exemplified in this fifth Word of Our Lord. For His terrible thirst did not appear outwardly, and though He endured it throughout the Passion, it was not till the last moment of His life that He made any mention of it. Even then He would have kept silence but our instruction demanded that He should speak.

So far, we have stressed the point that thirst is a most excruciating torture. We have still to recall that it was long endured by Our Lord.

When Our Saviour was scourged, He was already tired out after His prayer, His agony, and sweat of blood in the garden. He was weary after the many journeys he had been forced to make that night and the following day. For He had been dragged from the garden to the house of Annas; thence to Caiphas; from the house of Caiphas He was hurried to the court of Pilate; Pilate sent Him to Herod, and Herod, in turn, sent Him back again to Pilate. In all these journeys many miles were travelled, and Our Lord had taken neither food nor drink, nor had He any sleep, since the Supper on the previous evening. After the scourging not only was His thirst not relieved, but it was further increased, for now He was crowned with thorns and insulted afresh. Almost ready to die of thirst, He is then laden with the Cross, and made to set out for the Hill of Calvary. Arrived there, they offer Him, at last, wine mixed with gall. But, "when he had tasted, He would not drink." Then followed the three terrible hours of darkness, during which Our Saviour continued to bear the torment of this burning thirst. So that we can say with all truth, that from the very beginning of His Passion until His death on the Cross, Our Saviour bore this most grievous torment with unexampled patience.

How are we to imitate Christ's patience? By obeying the commands of the Church. She bids us fast and pray. Observance of the Laws of Fast and Abstinence demands no small degree of patience. And, as for prayer, there are many who rush through this sacred duty as though they were laden with a very heavy burden, and desired nothing so much as to cast it from them as quickly as possible. They will not train themselves by patience to the habit of self-control so necessary for a prayerful life. We have other commands from the Church-- charity to the poor, frequent reception of the sacraments-- and, for the proper discharge of them, we have need to train ourselves after the Model of Patience given us on Calvary.

VI

“It is consummated.”

(JOHN XIX, 30)

Our Lord's sixth Word followed close on the fifth. “Jesus, therefore,” writes St. John, “when He had taken the vinegar, said: ‘It is consummated.’” Two tasks had been given to Our Lord by His Father-- the preaching of the Gospel, and the Redemption of the human race by suffering. The first of these was “consummated” the evening before He suffered when He said, in the hearing of His apostles: “Father, I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do. I have manifested Thy name to men.” Now, on the Cross, He murmurs: “It is consummated. I have drained the chalice of suffering to the dregs. I have finished the second task entrusted Me. Nothing now remains, except that I go forth from this world.”

St. John is anxious to be as brief as possible in his description of these sacred moments. So he does not tell us what “it” refers to, in this word of Our Saviour.

The Fathers say that “it” may mean, in the first place, the fulfillment of the prophecies. For now all these were “consummated.” Christ had been born of a Virgin: “Behold a virgin shall conceive”; His birth had been in Bethlehem: “Out of thee, Bethlehem, He shall come forth unto Me that is to be the Ruler in Israel”; He had been announced by a strange star: “A star shall rise out of Jacob”; the Magi, “kings of Tharsis and the islands,” had “offered presents”. So, too, He had fulfilled the office of preacher; “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, He hath sent Me to preach the gospel to the poor.” Miracles had been multiplied: “The Lord Himself will come and save you. Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall be free.” He had ridden on the ass's colt: “Thy king will come to thee, the Just and Saviour. He is poor and riding upon an ass.” Indeed, His whole Passion had been described in detail by the prophets, and He had said: “Behold, we go up to Jerusalem and all these things will be accomplished which were written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man.” So now, on Calvary, Our Saviour might well have referred to this accomplishment when He said: “It is consummated.”

“The words may also mean,” says St. John Chrysostom, “that the power which men and devils had been permitted to use against Himself was now at an end.” They had had their “hour,” the hour of the powers of darkness. Now, too, was ended that mortal life, Christ's exile, during which He hungered and thirsted, slept, was weary, was subject to blows and injuries. Here on Calvary was ended the great Sacrifice, to which all the Sacrifices of the Old Law had looked forward. In this Sacrifice the Priest is the God-Man, and the Cross His altar; the victim is the Lamb of God; Charity is the fire that consumes this Victim; and the Redemption of the world is the fruit of the Sacrifice. A Sacrifice of worth, indeed!

At the death of Christ the great war between Him and the enemy of souls was also “consummated.” “I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men to Myself.” Now He has been lifted up and has snatched the souls of men from the thralldom of Satan. “The Son's obedience out-valued the disobedience of the slave; humbled to the death of the Cross, the Son honours the Father more than the defiance of the slave had insulted Him. Thus, through the Son, is “consummated” the reconciliation of the human race to the Father; thus has He “translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love.” But, if this be true, how is it that souls are still lost-- slaves of Satan in life and his victims in death? Briefly, the answer is: No man, is lost, except through his own fault; to all God gives grace which, if used, will infallibly secure salvation.

“It is consummated” may refer very well, in the last place, to the work of building up the Church of Christ. In His Baptism, He had begun this work: He “consummated” or completed it in His

Passion. As Eve came forth from the ribs of Adam while he was asleep, so, when Christ slept in death, the Church issued from His side. "All is consummated except My death. This is fast overtaking Me, and then the price is paid. The souls I love are redeemed souls." If we take this word of Christ as referring to the fulfilment of the prophecies, we may well learn a practical lesson. Since we know that some prophecies have been fulfilled, ought we not live continually in remembrance of those which are still to follow? Our Lord has come in lowliness; but in judgment and in might and in power will His second coming be. "Watch ye, therefore, because ye know not at what hour your Lord will come." What would you say of a man who was told by an architect that his house was liable to fall at any moment; who affirmed stoutly that he believed this; and who yet remained placidly sitting in the house? Or of a sick man who, when forbidden by his doctor to drink wine, avows that the doctor's advice is most useful, but in the next breath demands wine, and is enraged if it is denied him? Even so do we act if, while we express our belief in Christ's coming, we allow our acts to belie our belief.

At the death of Christ His life of toil and exile was brought to a close. For thirty-three years He had laboured; for eternity He is at rest. He worked in hunger and thirst, amid many sorrows, in spite of innumerable injuries; He was scourged, wounded and put to death. But now, "God has exalted Him and has given Him a name which is above all names." On the other hand, the Jews rejoiced for a short hour during the Passion of Christ; Judas was gladdened for a moment by the possession of his thirty pieces; Pilate was at rest for a while, for had not he kept in favour with the emperor, and had he not made friends with Herod? Sixteen hundred years have since passed, and, if these men died unrepentant, their smoke ascends from the fire that burns but does not consume-- at this moment it ascends and it will never be quenched. Does not this thought throw much searching light on my standard of values?

We have said that Christ was a priest on the Cross; His disciples, too, are priests. Not all are set aside to offer Him the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, but to all are addressed the words of St. Paul: "I beseech you, brethren, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing to God, your reasonable service," Here the Apostle shows that we are to offer spiritual sacrifices-- he does not mean that we are literally to slay ourselves-- and he points out that our sacrifices are to have the same four qualities as the sacrifice of the Jews. If they are to please Him who is life itself, they must be living. We must indeed be victims, but living victims, conquerors of the death of sin, and throbbing with the exuberance of the life of sanctifying grace. And our sacrifice must be holy, that is it must be chosen from those animals which are clean. Among the Jews some animals and some birds were considered "clean," and some were "unclean." The animals typify the life of active work in God's service; the birds are symbolical of contemplation. The man given up to active work must imitate the simplicity and gentleness of the lamb, at the same time that, like the ox, he bears the yoke of labour. Like the goat (another "clean" animal) he will be swift to ascend the mountains of prayer, and make sure to sanctify his works of zeal by performing them in union with God. Let no one think to separate the active life from the contemplative, for how can any work be pleasing to God unless the labourer has first enkindled in his heart the fire of divine love? Those who live the life of contemplation have need to imitate the solitude of the pigeon, the purity of the dove, and the prudence of the sparrow. Shut away from all intercourse with the world, their one occupation should be the praises of their Lord.

Thus will our sacrifice, too, be "pleasing to God." A heart seized by the love of God sends up before Him unbroken streams of the incense of pure prayer. God is its King: to Him belong all its affections. And than such a sacrifice, what can be more "reasonable"? Who, in the light of Calvary, can question its reasonableness?

VII

“Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.”

(LUKE XXIII, 46).

Our Lord was now at the point of death, and He cried out with a loud voice: “Father, into Thy hands I commend My Spirit” “Father,” Well might He call God His Father, for He had ever been an obedient Son, obedient even unto death. “Into Thy Hands.” Holy Scripture tells us that the hands of God are His intelligence and His will, or His wisdom and His power. “I commend.” I hand over to Thee My Spirit, to be kept for Me, knowing that Thou wilt restore it to Me again at the time appointed by Thy unalterable decree. If we understand “spirit” as meaning the soul of Our Lord, we must guard against imagining that the holy soul incurred any danger at the moment of its leaving His Body. For men, at the hour of death, are wont to recommend their souls to the earnest prayers of their friends, as they are anxious to secure all possible assistance at that passage. But Our Saviour had no need of anxiety about His soul; He merely placed it under the protection of the Father until such time as it should re-occupy His body. However, to me it seems more likely that Our Lord’s “spirit” refers here to the life of His Body. His prayer would thus mean: “Father, I hand over to Thee the life of My Body. I am dying for men; but do Thou, My Father, soon restore to Me the life of My Body in the hour of My Resurrection.” He desired to die for us, but He wished, too, to be soon restored to life.

In this last word of Our Saviour I see made manifest in a marvellous manner His power, His wisdom, and His charity.

His power was shown by the fact that, at the moment of death, He “cried out with a loud voice.” From this we gather that it was in His power not to die and that it was only at His own bidding that death came to Him. Ordinarily, men are in a state of great weakness at the hour of death, so as to be quite unable to utter a word. But Our Lord “cried out with a loud voice.” This explains why the centurion was converted on the spot; and why he returned from Calvary proclaiming “indeed this was the Son of God.”

Here, too, Christ's wisdom shines forth. The rocks burst open, the earth quaked, the veil of the temple was rent. So would the Wisdom of the Cross soften hearts long hardened in sin, and the Holy of Holies, until now hidden from view. be opened wide for all who would enter to behold the face to face vision of the splendours of the Godhead.

Christ’s wisdom was also shown by His causing the Cross which has been despised to become an object, not only of honour, but of tender affection. When St. Andrew saw the Cross to which he was about to be nailed, he cried out: “Hail, precious Cross, which hast had the honour of bearing the Body of my Saviour. How long have I sought thee! So eagerly desired thee!.... See, I am ready for thee. My heart burns with the desire to possess thee. Deign to receive me, and let thy receiving be in gladness, for now I am become His disciple Who hung on thee, Jesus Christ, My Saviour.”

And now what shall I say of Our Lord’s charity? “Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friend.” “In how many ways, O Jesus, didst Thou, while dying on the Cross, show Thy love for me! Thou didst surrender Thy most precious life for Thine enemies, thankless sinners. Thou didst surrender it that Thou mightest rescue these same ungrateful men from the flames of hell. Thou didst die, that Thou mightest make them Thy brethren and Thy friends. Who would not love Thee? Who would not be ready to undergo any suffering for love of Thee?”

“Into Thy Hands I commend My Spirit.” Holy Church suggests three occasions on which this prayer may very suitably be used. We say it every evening in Compline, because “at the first approach of darkness, when night is coming on, death might more easily take us by surprise. So we commend our soul to God that death may not find us unprepared.” We say it also before we receive Holy

Communion. For “he that eateth the body of the Lord unworthily eateth judgment to himself.” Hence, we commend our spirit to Our Father, that, while we comply with the invitation to His Banquet, we come at the same time clothed with the virtues this most sacred act demands.

And the third occasion when we should repeat this prayer of Our Lord is the moment of death, when our spirit is passing from our body. For if, at that moment, our soul happens to fall into the hands of Satan, we have lost all chance of salvation. And, “what doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his own soul?”

Our Lord's prayer was fully answered. For not only was life given back to His Body, but He remained dead only for time sufficient to prove beyond dispute that He really was dead. Jonas, who had been three days in the fish's belly, was a figure of Christ. But God so ordained that, in the case of Our Lord, these three days should be shortened to one complete day and two parts of two other days. Again the Father answered His Son's prayer, by giving Him back, not only His living Body, but by giving it back glorious and immortal. “Christ, rising from the dead, dieth now no more; death shall no more have dominion over Him.”

How can we sum up better all we have been saying about these seven words than by pointing to the source whence issued the entire Passion and Death of Our Saviour-- not only His Passion, but His whole life? That life was one continuous act of obedience to the Will of His Father. “In the head of the book,” wrote David, “it is written of Me that I should do Thy Will; O My God, I have desired it, and Thy Law is in the midst of My Heart.” Thus, obedience is the structure on which was raised His life in all its details. Because the Father wills it He lives for many years in the silence and obscurity of Nazareth; at the bidding of His Father, He comes forth, and His wisdom and eloquence and miracles astonish the world. Throughout, as well in His retirement as in His publicity, the ruling factor is the Will of the Father. “The things that are pleasing to Him I always do.” And now, as we kneel with Him on Calvary, we try to imbibe this lesson. For here is the culmination of obedience. “He humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death, even unto the death of the Cross.”



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