

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
March 5, 2017
Spiritual Ponderings
7 Last Words of Christ

St. Maximilian once described “the Cross is the school of love.” St. Francis De Sales called “the cross the academy of love.” Seizing on the wisdom expressed in the quotes from St. Maximilian Kolbe and St. Francis DeSales, I think it is important that each Catholic take time to explore the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ death in many different ways. One ancient way the Church has helped its members do this is through a devotion that focuses the Christian on the last Seven Words of Christ. I invite you therefore to reflect with me on these last seven words.

1. Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” Luke 23:34

Growing up, I use to think that turning the other cheek was a sort of wimpy and passive action. Now, I see that turning the other cheek has nothing to do with being wimpy and passive. When we turn the other cheek, we are actually telling others that they can do their worse to us and we will still remain the same loving person that we have always been. If we are honest with ourselves, we realize that we spend a lot of time reacting to others instead of being who we want to be. For example, I want to be a loving person, but when someone cuts me off while I am driving, there are times that I stop being a loving person and I become an anger filled person. Jesus loves us no matter what we do to Him. We can spit on Him, whip Him, strip Him naked, nail Him to a cross, and He will still love us and pleads our cause to our Father in heaven: “Father forgive them.”

Archbishop Fulton Sheen in his book: *The Cross and the Beatitudes: Lessons on Love and Forgiveness* connects these last words of Jesus on the Cross to our Lord’s beatitude about meekness. “How different this is from the beatitude of the world! The world blesses not the meek, but the vindictive; it praises not the one who turns the other cheek, but the one who renders evil for evil; it exalts not the humble, but the aggressive. Social and political forces have carried that spirit of violence, struggle for power, and the clenched fist to an extreme the like of which the world before has never seen... To correct such a warlike attitude of the clenched fist, Our Lord both preached and practiced meekness.”

2. Jesus replied to him, “Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43).

It is interesting that Jesus’ declaration of universal forgiveness is followed by a specific act of forgiveness. Jesus had professed that He was willing to forgive everyone and now he had a specific opportunity to demonstrate it. I have come to believe that it is always easier to say that I want to be a forgiving person and that it much more difficult to actually be a forgiving person.

Often the people we that are in need of our forgiveness are closer than we can imagine. It is often our siblings, parents, children, etc. We declare our desire to forgive others at Mass especially at the Our Father and the Sign of Peace but do we really make an effort when we go home to do so?

Jesus offers paradise to the repent thief despite the fact that the thief had nothing. He like Jesus was probably stripped of every worldly possession. God’s mercy is always free. He loves us so much. All that He asks of us is that we ask Him for it so because He respects our freewill. The other thief did not receive the gift of paradise because he never asks for it. He is so caught up in blaming others for his problems that he misses out on the opportunity to change the direction of his life around.

Another insight one can gleam from this short encounter between the Good Thief and Christ is that paradise is found when both of them focus on the other. The good thief defends Christ and tries to feel what Christ must be feeling, as an innocent man being put to death in such a horrible way. Jesus, despite all His suffering is not turned inward on himself but is instead focused on helping the repent thief reach heaven. The non-repent thief chooses only to think about himself.

Let us finish this week’s reflection with a quote from St. Leo the Great: “No one, however weak, is denied a share in the victory of the cross. No one is beyond the help of the prayer of Christ. His prayer brought benefit to the multitude that raged against him. How much more does it bring to those who turn to him in repentance.”

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
March 12, 2017
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7 Last Words of Christ

According to St. Augustine the Cross can be described as “The death of the Lord our God should not be a cause of shame for us; rather, it should be our greatest hope, our greatest glory. In taking upon himself the death that he found in us, he has most faithfully promised to give us life in him, such as we cannot have of ourselves.” Therefore, as we continue to dive deeper into the lessons that the Cross is trying to teach us let us ask God for the gift of wisdom.

3. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.” John 19:26-27.

One of my favorite spiritual heroes is Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan. He was a Vietnamese bishop during the Vietnam War. As part of the North’s victory, Cardinal Van Thuan was arrested and placed in a concentration camp where the communist tortured him in some of the most inhumane ways possible. Eventually the communists grew frustrated with him and placed him under house arrest in North Vietnam. During this time the Vatican and the rest of the world assumed that he was dead. While under house arrest, he wrote a book called *The Road of Hope: a Gospel from Prison*. The book, which was written on the back of old calendars, contained spiritual statements that were meant to strengthen the people of Vietnam. Eventually the Vatican negotiated his release and he was exiled from Vietnam. Pope John Paul II made him the head of the Peace and Justice office in the Vatican and invited the Cardinal to preach the Lenten retreat in the year 2000.

Cardinal Thuan wrote this about the gift of Mary: “‘Here is your Mother’ (Jn 19:27). After the institution of the Blessed Eucharist, the Lord could not have left us anything greater than Mary. She has crushed the head of the serpent. She will help you to conquer the devil, “the flesh” and “the world.” She will obtain for you the graces to hold firm to the noble ideal which the Lord has placed in your heart.”

Sometimes, the greatest part of suffering is not the pain one feels but seeing others suffer because of our suffering. I can only imagine how Jesus felt, hanging there on the cross seeing his mother suffer. In a way though it was her love and support that helped Him stay the path that the Father had laid out before Him. When we are sick or ill, we must be willing to allow people to help and support us. We should not hold onto stubborn pride. We should also

4. And about three o’clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?”* which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Mathew 27:46

When we first hear this passage, we can think of it as a prayer of despair but Jesus is actually reciting Psalm 22. The psalm can be summarized in three parts. It starts off listing all the miseries the psalm writer is going through. The second part is where the author promises to remain faithful to God and finally the person declares his trust in God and knows that God will bring out good from the situation. Far from being a rejection of God this is a moment of recommitting himself to the Father. During our time of suffering, do we take the time to recommit ourselves to the Lord. One way in which the psalmist does it is by reminding himself of God’s faithfulness in the past. When you feel abandon do you take the time to think about all the things God has done for us in the past.

Here is one last quote from Cardinal Thuan: “You suffer most when you suffer at the hands of those who should understand and sympathize with you, indeed those who have the obligation to defend you. Unite yourself with Jesus who hung on the cross and cried: “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46).”

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
March 19, 2017
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7 Last Words of Christ

Let us begin today's reflection with a quote from Cardinal Thuan: "You have to make many sacrifices when you live in the midst of people who differ from you politically, socially, and ideologically. But look at the example of Jesus. He Who is God chose to live among humanity I thirty-three years of continual sacrifice."

5. "I thirst" (John 19:28)

Fulton Sheen in his book: *The Cross and Beatitudes: Lessons on Love and Forgiveness* is quick to point out the following when it comes to Jesus' thirst. "It was not a thirst for earthly waters, for the earth and its oceans were his. And when they offered him vinegar and gall as a sedative for his sufferings he refused it. It was therefore not a physical, but a spiritual thirst that troubled him—the thirst for the Beatitude of Justice—an insatiable thirst for the souls of human beings."

Pope Benedict XVI in his book *God is Love* talks about the many different types of love in the world by talking about how the Greeks had seven words for love. Pope Benedict XVI talks about "agape love" which is the highest form of love because it is totally selfless. It is the love that wants what is best for the other even if it requires a sacrifice on our part. We know that God's love is this way. He desires what is best for us. Pope Benedict XVI also writes about "eros love". This love is best describe as a "possessive love". I have to have it type of love that boards on infatuation. Finally, Pope Benedict XVI explains that in God these two love meet and perfect each other. God not only loves me and wants what is best for me but he desires (He thirsts) to be with me. This idea of Pope Benedict XVI has deepened my relationship with God because I realize that God does not just love me and thus tolerates me. He loves me and desires to be with me. As a child who was never chosen first for any team at recess growing up, I imagine God always choosing me first so much does He desire to have me as a part of His team. What does it mean to you to know that God not only loves you but also desires to be with you? He would literally rather die than be without you.

6. "It is consummated/finished." (John 19:30)

Cardinal Thuan in his book: *Road of Hope: A Gospel from Prison* writes the following: "Don't be discouraged by your failures. When you seek to do the will of God and meet with failure, that failure may be a success in God's eyes because the outcome is as God desired. Look at the example of Jesus on the cross."

It is my opinion that the first sin of Adam and Eve was not that they ate something against God's will but that their disobedience rather was a manifestation of their doubt of God's love for them. God had done so many things for them. He created the world, the plants & animals, He gave them a good home (Eden), and a meaningful job. All of these were things that were meant to demonstrate God's love for them. The devil comes and with one question makes them doubt God's love. Their act of disobedience was a sign of their new lack of trust in God. Instead of recalling all the good things God had done for them, they chose to believe the serpents suggestion that God was holding back on them. God's answer to humanity's doubts about God's love for them was to send His Son into the world to show us that God would rather die than be without us. Jesus says through His death, that God loves us this much. Salvador Dali painted a picture of Jesus being crucified and he intentionally left the nails out of the painting. When asked why, Salvador Dali told people that it was not the nails that kept Christ on the Cross but rather His love for us.

I truly believe that one of the problems in our Church today is that we are filled with groups of people who give up too easily. St. Ignatius of Loyola in his rules of discernment warns Christians that desolation (the feeling of God's absence) is a part of the Christian journey. Instead of giving up we need to stay the course and keep praying through the dry spell (desolation).

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
March 26, 2017
Spiritual Ponderings
7 Last Words of Christ

As we continue our Lenten journey and reflecting upon the Cross let us prepare ourselves to go deeper by reflecting on this quote from St. Teresa of Avila: "Reflect carefully on this, for it is so important that I can hardly lay too much stress on it. Fix your eyes on the Crucified and nothing else will be of much importance to you," and now this quote from theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar: "It is to the Cross that the Christian is challenged to follow his Master: no path of redemption can make a detour around it."

7. "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." (Luke 23:46)

In their book: *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search of Meaning*, Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketchum offer many different insights that they have gained from studying the 12 step methods. The insight I remember the most from this book is the following about surrendering your will to God: "According to the way of life that flows from this insight, it is only by ceasing to play God, by coming to terms with errors and shortcomings, and by accepting the inability to control every aspect of their lives that alcoholics (or any human beings) can find the peace and serenity that alcohol (or other drugs, or sex, money material possessions, power or privilege) promise but never deliver."

Another way of saying it is my life is always better when I let God be God and me be me. When I trust in God and commend my life to Him things will always turn out for the good. When I try to do things my way then things go horrible wrong. St. Peter is a good example of this. He tried to do things his way and ended up deny Christ. Upon the resurrection, Peter allows God to direct his life even to the point where Peter allows himself to be crucified upside down.

This last saying of Christ is also a model for us. After we have seen how much God loves us, we must respond. We can hold back and not accept that love or we can commend ourselves to the Father's love. God is asking us to spend eternity with Him. Will we say yes? Or will we say no?

A story from Ketchum and Kurtz's book reminds us how hard it is to give up and trust God.

"Clifford was leaning out against the fence, enjoying a beautiful view from the top of the Grand Canyon, when the wooden posts suddenly ripped from their cement moorings. Seconds later, Clifford was plunging down into the abyss.

Halfway to the bottom of his desperate arm-waving helped Clifford catch and clutch the branch of a scrubby tree that grew from the canyon wall. Grasping, grasping, he looked both up and down. No way could he climb that sheer cliff, even if he could swing his body toward the wall. But below yawned the chasm, unbroken by any other tree of holding place. To fall would be to die, horribly crushed on the rocks below. No one had seen him fall, and he hung there out of sight, knowing that the wind would scatter his weak voice no matter how loudly he shouted.

Desperate Clifford cried out to the heavens: "God help me!" Hearing his own trembling voice, he wailed again "God please help me."

To Clifford's amazement, he heard an immediate answer. "All right," came the voice. The initial warmth Clifford felt turned to a chill wind gripping his body as the voice continued: "Let go."

Looking down, Clifford saw the huge boulders waiting below, and he knew again that if he let go he would surely die. Let go? He thought. "But God you don't understand!" he yelled up. "I'm too far up. I'll..."

"Let's go," the voice repeated.

Silence filled the canyon. Then, in a weak, terrified voice Clifford called out, "Is there anyone else up there?"

***Bonus reflection.**

I came across the following quote in Fulton Sheen's book **Life of Christ**: "The Last Judgment was prefigured on Calvary: The Judge was in the center, and the two divisions of humanity on either side: the saved and the lost, the sheep and the goats. When He would come in glory to judge all men, the Cross would be with Him then too, but as a badge of honor, not shame."

Fulton Sheen continues "Two thieves crucified on either side of Him at first blasphemed and cursed. Suffering does not necessarily make men better; it can sear and burn the soul, unless men are purified by seeing its redemptive value. Unspiritualized suffering may cause men to degenerate. The thief on the left asked to be taken down. But the thief on the right, evidently moved by Our Savior's priestly prayer of intercession asked to be taken up."