

# Veritas Christi

The Truth of Christ

## "The Seven Last Words of Jesus"

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"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

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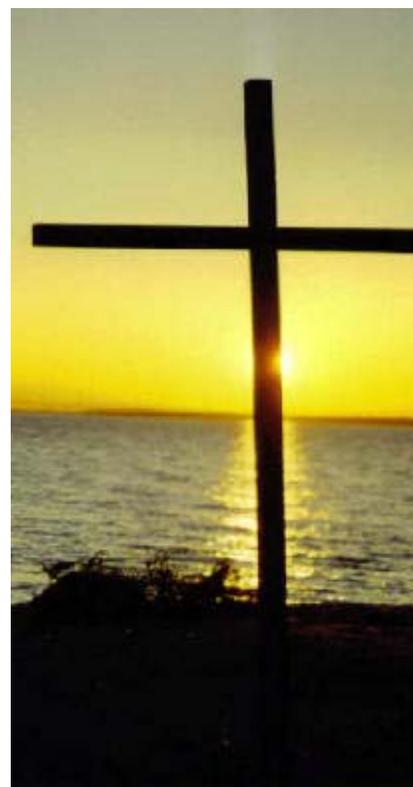
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Jesus on the Cross has not only an altar of sacrifice, but a pulpit to preach from.

Jesus preaches by example and by a sermon of seven short sentences.

Due to the brevity of these last sentences, traditionally called the seven last words of Jesus, these words can more readily penetrate the heart and be more easily recalled.

The last words of a dying person always have significance, and this is most especially true of our Divine Lord Jesus who offered himself and his humanity for our salvation.



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The suffering servant songs of Isaiah prophesied the sacrificial offering of Jesus on the cross. Isaiah 53:12 says, "He has born the sins of many and has prayed for the transgressors." This prophecy is fulfilled in the first of the seven last words that Jesus speaks from the cross - "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Most often the crucified would go into a state of hysteria and despair, blaspheming, cursing themselves and those around them. Jesus shows his divinity by his words and words of forgiveness to those who were cruelly subjecting Him to a most death.

Jesus desires not vengeance for his persecutors and torturers, but repentance well being in time and in eternity. In the book "The Passion of Jesus and Its Meaning" by Fr. James Groenings, which I used as a resource to stimulate the preparation of these reflections, it is written, "There are Christians who have forgiveness on their tongues and who even in their outward demeanor show aversion to their enemies, but in their hearts they desire that God be their avenger that He withhold not from their enemies the punishment which they deserve (

We do not need to have warm, gushy feelings toward those who have hurt us we may have quite contrary feelings such as anger, resentment.

What do we do with these feelings? We make an act of the will. We pray for them to show them kindness and congeniality so far as the opportunity to do so presents.

This is consistent with Jesus' command to love. "Love your enemies." If we love them we would want them to be reconciled with God and to come to salvation. "Father, forgive them."

We pray, and strive to love, as Jesus did.

It is significant that Jesus prayed to God as "Father." Jesus did not pray "my Father" but rather prayed "Father" so that His prayer was not just representative of His but of ours.

"Father, forgive them" Jesus says. The "them" is the torturers, the rebellious crowd whom Jesus desired to share in his sonship as brethren united to the one Father. "them" is also us who are children of God, in need of the Father's forgiveness because of our sins. We have crucified Christ because of our sins.

We at times excuse ourselves from our own transgressions. We see them as "minor transgressions" or even trivial, especially in respect to such events as surrounding Jesus' crucifixion. One can say, "I did not scourge Him at the pillar. I did not place the crown of thorns on his head. I did not place the nails in his hands and feet." Even our sins that were responsible for this, and even the seemingly most insignificant sins were atoned for by Jesus' horrible death. We should perhaps be less critical of those who were actually present at Jesus' crucifixion and more critical of ourselves. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

What would we have done during the time leading up to Jesus' death? How would we have acted toward Jesus who claimed to be the Son of God, and one equal to God? Jesus was a stumbling block to the Jews, and folly to the Gentiles. Even his disciples walked away from Him during this time of trial. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

We know what we do when we sin, although the full dynamic of the damaging nature of that sin is not always evident. We must pray for others who have no sense of sin; they will come to understand the reality of sin and repent of their sins to the Father through Jesus Christ who continues to pray, "Father, forgive them."

"Amen, I Say to You, This Day You Shall be with Me in Paradise."

We have just reflected on the need to forgive our enemies, and of our own need for God's forgiveness due to the sins we commit. Now Jesus, in these words, expresses hope that we are to have in his great mercy as he extends the gift of salvation to the repentant thief.

The repentant thief is traditionally known as Dismas, and the unrepentant thief as Gestas.

It is suggested that the fact that these two criminals, and Christ himself, were able to speak words from the cross was due to God's awesome providence. As

in the last reflection, those crucified would often go into a frenzy of blasphemy cursing. The authorities would therefore often close, by means of hooks, the mouths of those being crucified, so as to prevent them from insulting their executioners. It is thought that an act of God prevented these hooks from sealing shut the mouths of those who were crucified with him.

Gesmas, the unrepentant criminal, used his freed lips and tongue to blaspheme Jesus. "If you are the Christ, save yourself and us."

Gesmas not only demanded of Jesus what he should do if he was indeed Christ the Savior, but also demanded that Christ enable him, by a miracle, to continue his life.

Gesmas's blasphemy shows his hardness of heart. Gesmas could no longer sin with his hands, which were bound to the cross, so he sinned with his tongue. His obstinacy shows how people, through sinful choices, can shape their character in such a way as to be attached to sin and evil and thus choose a horrible and lasting death.

Jesus loved Gesmas, and Jesus' merciful forgiveness was extended to him as to any other criminal, but Gesmas was not ready or willing to accept it. Dismas, the repentant criminal, was.

Dismas accepted the grace that moved him to recognize the innocence of Jesus and that Jesus was a king, and not just a king of any kingdom, but of a kingdom that Dismas wanted to be a part of. "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." These words, which are now often sung so beautifully, can be for us a prayer to say often to Jesus - "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." Jesus' response to this prayer; "This day, you will be with me in paradise."

What consolation should these words of Jesus give to us who regularly avail ourselves of God's mercy through the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist, and who pray through simple prayers such as "Jesus, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Jesus, through the offering of his mercy to Dismas, the repentant thief, opens for Dismas the gates of paradise. "This day, you will be with me in paradise."

These are words that we should long to hear from Jesus. After we have taken our breath and we come before Jesus' judgment seat we want Jesus to say to us "This day, you will be with me in paradise."

Dismas, who has gone before us, has heard these words. Why should we not have confidence that we too will hear them if we entrust ourselves, at each moment every day, to God's boundless mercy?

"When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing at the foot of the cross, he said to his mother: Woman, behold your son. After that he said to the disciple: Son, behold your mother."

Jesus' 1st words are expressed to his enemies. Jesus' 2nd words are given to the repentant criminal. Jesus' 3rd words are offered to his relatives and friends.

Mary was Jesus' mother. But there are a number of reasons given for why Jesus addressed Mary "woman" from the cross instead of "mother." First of all, at other times

Jesus acted as God he called her woman, eg., his first miracle at the wedding Cana. Now Jesus was to conclude his public ministry and perform his greatest dying on the cross and then rising on third the day. By calling Mary "woman" refers to Mary's creaturely status and to the fact that his sacrificial death rede as well. But she is the most exalted of creatures. She is the woman who will c head of the ancient serpent, Satan. But creature that she was, she suffered g to the death of her son. It is also suggested that Jesus did not call Mary "mot the cross because this tender word "mother," sweet as it is, would have been incredibly bitter to hear from the cross and would have increased Mary's sorr spoken to her from her dying son. Jesus also did not want to cause the excite anger from the crowd to be directed from him to his mother.

Mary is clearly the mother of sorrows, and co-redemptrix. It is significant that not faint and drop over from the exhaustion of her anguish, but instead she S the foot of the cross.

Mary stood beneath the cross of her son and shed tears of sadness, not in de: in patient hope. Mary offered herself with her Son, exemplifying to us the mo: sharing in Christ's sacrificial offering that one could possibly manifest.

Mary helps us to stand, with patient hope and love, at the feet of her crucifiec to unite ourselves to His perfect offering through her intercession and mother

Mary is our mother. Son, behold your mother. These words of Jesus spoken t are, as we know, also spoken to us. John, the beloved disciple, was able to ta into his home. We are able to take Mary into our hearts.

We are consoled when we ask Mary into our hearts and lives because she uni the Sacred Heart of her Son and his Divine life. But we do not just seek Mary Mother because of the consolation she can provide for us, but because we wa stand, like her, at the foot of the cross of her crucified son and share in his sa offering.

Fr. John Sweeney, FPO, visited with me a few months ago. He shared with me that most people who are devoted to Mary are willing to honor Mary through : offering of prayers through her intercession. They enjoy her consolation and p and enter into the pale blue of Mary's mantle. But he believes there are few w willing to know Mary as Our Lady of Sorrows, and to enter into the "deep blue mantle.

May we be willing to enter into the "deep blue" of Mary's mantle, and STAND at the foot of the Cross of her crucified Son and share in his work of redempti "Behold your Mother."

"And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying: My God, my : have you forsaken me?"

The ninth hour is 3 o' clock in the afternoon, the hour we now think of as the Divine Mercy. Is this cry of Jesus a cry for mercy?

Jesus' cry is addressed not as the cry of a Son to a Father, but as the cry of a God. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus, in his humanity (or his human nature) felt completely abandoned.

Although a Divine person, the eternally begotten Son of the Father felt, in his humanity, completely abandoned, forsaken by God. Yet in his Divinity Jesus possessed the beatific vision and oneness in being with the Father. St. Thomas explains that during this time of abandonment Jesus did not allow his Divine personhood to confer consolations to the faculties of his human nature.

Jesus, in his humanity, thus felt the intense pain of separation from God, a pain that is all the more acutely arduous/ painful due to the perfection of his humanity. Jesus' humanity is perfectly disposed to receive God, yet at this moment it is denied God's presence.

Although separated, abandoned by God, Jesus' abandonment cannot be equated with the experience of those who suffer in hell due to separation from God. Jesus could not suffer without hope. The words My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? are the opening words of psalm 22. The following excerpts are from psalm 22;

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why so far from my cries for help? My cries of anguish? My God, I call by day, but you do not answer, by night, I find no relief...I am a worm and no man, hardly human, scorned by everyone, despised by the people...many bulls surround me; fierce bulls of Bashan encircle me. They open their mouths against me, lions that rend and roar. Like water my life drains away, my bones grow soft. My heart has become like wax, it melts away within me. Dogs surround me; a pack of evildoers closes in on me. So wasted are my hands that I can count all of my bones. They stare at me and gloat; they divide my garments among them; for my clothing they cast lots."

One can easily see the parallels of these words of the psalmist with the nature of the experience and events of Jesus' crucifixion. It is thought that perhaps Jesus recited the entirety of psalm 22 on the cross in silent prayer. The above excerpts from the psalm express desperation, but other remaining parts express the hope that was Jesus'. The psalm goes on to say;

"But you Lord, do not stay far off; my strength come quickly to help me. For you have not spurned or disdained the misery of this poor wretch, Did not turn away from me but heard me when I cried out. And I will live in the Lord."

Since Jesus did not audibly express these latter words of the psalm, it is not clear to the crowd surrounding Jesus that his cry "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is not void of hope. Jesus thus makes himself appear most vulnerable, and his perfect humility conceals his divinity and sanctity. "How can this man be God if he has been thus abandoned by God?" the people would ask. Or they may conclude that a man must have sinned and this abandonment from God is God's just punishment for his sin." Yet Jesus was God, the Holy one who utters his cry in a loud voice so that all could hear "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

We are not the holy one of God. We are sinners who are to strive to become holy and united unto God. When we persist in sin, we must not so much call out My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" as "My God, my God, I have forsaken you." Grave sin separates us from God, and God allows us to experience the pain of that separation, yet God is always near and calling for our repentance.

Paradoxically, those who have reached a high state of spiritual perfection also experience a sense of abandonment from God. In this Dark night of the soul (rightly call out, with Jesus, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Yet Jesus that cry is to be one offered in hope of the fulfillment of his promises. The one who is allowed to undergo the trial of the dark night of the soul has been perfect in faith and in hope enough so as to be able to persevere through the trial while perfecting the soul's capacity to give and to receive his love.

We have to be honest with ourselves. Have I forsaken God in some way that I am in darkness, or is God allowing me to become more perfect in the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love through a trial, a taste of the Dark night of the

No matter where one is at spiritually, one can never go wrong calling out to God. He will never forsake us. We must cooperate with the grace that God faithfully offers as he brings us to perfection in and through his Son.

"Afterwards, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished that the Son of Man might be fulfilled, said, 'I thirst.'"

Thirst - not something that we have to experience very often, and if so, not very intensely or for a very long time.

The physical thirst individuals experienced on the cross was a very intense physical suffering. In fact, it is written that this physical thirst is the most intense physical suffering endured in crucifixion. This makes sense when you consider that the human body is 90 percent water, and every single cell and tissue in our body needs water. Jesus had lost a lot of fluid due to the blood and water that came forth through his wounds. He pours in the agony of the garden, during the scourging at the pillar and the crown with thorns, and he sweat even more and bled as he carried the cross under the hot sun. And now Jesus is suspended in the heat of the afternoon sun on the

I spoke to a doctor the other day and she said that pathology reports of individuals who have died of dehydration are horrible to read. If every part of your body needs water, then when the body loses and is deprived of water every single part of the body suffers.

We have only to think of the terrible death Terri Schiavo is being subjected to. If she must continue without hydration she will share in a most intimate way in Jesus' physical suffering. Jesus saying "I thirst" from the cross is the equivalent of his saying "My whole body is being consumed by fire." None of the other bodily pains - the crown of thorns, the nail marks in the hands and feet, the scourges all over his body - would be noticed any more. They would become as if numb in contrast to the pain of the burning fire within each and every cell and tissue of his body from such intense thirst.

It is for this reason that of the physical suffering Jesus endured, this is the one that he makes an explicit reference to - "I thirst."

Jesus' revelation of his bodily pain through these words "I thirst" brought about the fulfillment of the prophecy in Psalm 69 "for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." If Jesus had not made his thirst known, then how could the prophecy have been fulfilled? Yet notice that Jesus does not ask that his thirst be relieved in any way. He simply states, "I thirst."

The providential plan of God the Father, which brought about our redemption, fulfilled to the minutest detail when the soldier raises the sponge to Jesus' lip:

This shows us the value that there is in fidelity to even the smallest matters.

Jesus, through these words, also shows us how we are to express our bodily sufferings.

We can speak about our sufferings that are physical in nature when our doing some true benefit to ourselves or to others. Do we express our sufferings to those who can help us to be relieved of or to minimize our sufferings, eg., those responsible for our care to help us with our health - a spouse, our parents, a doctor? Do we express our need for prayer to others when we are experiencing a particularly severe suffering?

Or do we also speak of our sufferings to those whose knowledge of them will bring no benefit to us or them, in more of a way that goes on and on as complaining - an expression of self-pity?

Jesus' expression of this bodily suffering benefits us as Jesus shows us the value of being resigned to the physical sufferings that befall us. These "kisses from the lips" are not to be sought for their own sake, and we do have a serious responsibility for our bodies, but when there is not much that we can do about our bodily sufferings we do not need to loudly complain. Jesus only cried out in a loud voice with his suffering, but there is no evidence in scripture that he did so with this physical affliction.

When we offer our sufferings to God following Christ's example they become meritorious, redemptive, and infinite in value. The Lord Jesus "thirsts" for such offerings from us.

"When Jesus therefore had taken the vinegar, he said: 'It is consummated.'" - John 19:30  
of Jesus' last seven words.

With these words Jesus, the dying redeemer, declares that the mission of his life has been fulfilled. The sacrifice of Jesus' life, the most perfect of sacrifices, was now consummated.

Jesus, the Lamb of God, offers himself in atonement for the sins of the whole world. His offering was a true sacrifice as it had all of the elements essential to a sacrifice:

1) the gift of the sacrifice was visible - the gift was visible in Christ's humanity suffering and died not just in appearance but in fact.

2) the visible gift of Jesus' body and blood was offered up - the offering is the gift to sacrifice.

3) the sacrifice was offered directly to God. This sacrifice, to be offered directly to God, must then be destroyed in some way since this is the only way it can be offered to God. The OT sacrifices required the shedding of blood. Blood was considered the life force of the body, and the shedding of blood was a necessary part of the immolation of the sacrifice. Some sacrifices were burned after the outpouring of blood, to be completely destroyed. But the paschal lamb, slaughtered for the feast of Passover,

not. As we recall from last evenings reading from Exodus, the blood of the slain lamb was to be applied to door posts and lintel of each home so that God, an angel of death that he would send forth, would pass over that home. The lamb destroyed by fire but the remains were to be eaten that very night in those homes. Now it is with Jesus, the Lamb of God. His blood is poured out and applied to the remission of sin, so that we may not have to experience lasting death. Although his soul is separated from his body, Jesus' body is not completely destroyed but three days later is raised from the tomb and now reigns gloriously in heaven. And we now offer the flesh of the lamb, the lamb of God, in the Eucharistic sacrifice, in which Christ is both priest and victim.

This atoning sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary, re-presented or made actually present at each Mass, is infinite in value.

The infinite value of the sacrifice of the cross is evident first of all from the indignity and holiness of Jesus Christ, the one who both offers and is being offered in sacrifice. Secondly, the infinite value of the sacrifice is evident from the satisfaction and merit that the sacrifice contains. The satisfaction is offered to each person through the ages, and cannot be exhausted. As Fr. Groenings writes in his book; "It cannot be diminished even if there were a million times more human beings, even if the flowing wealth were a million times greater, and if the world were to last for an eternity." This sacrifice merits for us perfect reconciliation with God and restores grace, and thus with our cooperation we can merit eternal life. The cooperation of ourselves with Christ's perfect sacrifice allows, as was said before, for our sacrifice to become meritorious, redemptive, and infinite in value.

How happy will we be if when death draws near we can too can say with Jesus "It is consummated." In other words, to be able to say "It is finished, completed" that my sacrifice of my own life is consummated.

How tragic it is that some have not begun to do the work of the heavenly Father that others have grown lukewarm or indifferent in respect to doing the will of

God. May we, who have begun to do God's will to undertake the particular mission entrusted to us in his plan of redemption, see it through to completion, and thus receive the eternal fruits of our offering.

"And Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands, I commend my Spirit.' And saying this, he gave up his Spirit."

With Jesus' words "It is consummated" Jesus announced the moment of death, the consummation of his sacrifice, the completion of his work of redemption.

With the words, "Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit" Jesus states that the moment has come - death. All that he has to do is die. Although all power and authority are his, Jesus surrenders himself to impotence and humiliation. All has been ordained for this time and with the words "Father, into your hands, I commend my Spirit" Jesus gives himself over to death.

But in handing himself over to death, commending his Spirit to the Father, Jesus knows that he was commending himself to the most loving and faithful of fathers. Jesus does not call out "God" as he did when experiencing his abandonment, but in this last moment Jesus calls out "Father" and thus expresses the filial love he reciprocates from

Father and the confidence he has in him. Jesus, in calling God his Father, knows his offering would be one that would be well provided for, and he was confident the Spirit he had just given away would be returned to him and united with his body which although now disfigured beyond recognition on the cross, would be glorious in heaven. Jesus' body had already been handed over, but he remained in the possession of his Spirit. It is only now that Jesus hands over his Spirit, and not to a crowd and to the torturers as he did his body, but to the loving care of his Father. He did not have to give up his Spirit, as his Divinity allows him to remain in perfect possession of all of the faculties of his humanity. Yet he does so in humility, surrendering all that he is and has to the Father.

We too must subject all that we are and have to the Father. Each night the pious religious, when praying night prayer, say these words of Jesus - Into your hands I commend my spirit. The laity are also encouraged to pray the Liturgy of the Hours. What a beautiful thing it is to commend ourselves to the Lord in this way before we go to rest. For we do not know if we will awake from sleep. We want our Spirits entrusted to God. If our spirits are commended to God, handed over to Him, then we can be confident that even if we die in our sleep we will one day arise from sleep and forever share the glory of God's kingdom.

Jesus spoke this last word again in a loud voice. It is miraculous that Jesus had the strength to do so, and this itself offers proof of his divinity. But it is also a profound act of love. Jesus, through these words spoken for us and for all to hear, gives us the example of resignation to God the Father. Jesus wants us to abide with him as one with the Father, that we may all be one. He wants this now and forever. The separation of the soul from the body at death, as painful and tragic as it is, is for those who have commended themselves to God the means through which one enters into eternal life. Jesus, in commending his Spirit to the Father, shows that he was obedient even unto death. We are to follow Jesus' example of obedience, even unto death, and are to commend, like Him, our Spirits, our whole being, to the Father.

"Father, into your hands, I commend my Spirit."

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