

## Tract 7: Seven Last Words for Our Times

Meditation on the Seven Last Words of Christ presents a devotion of long-standing tradition. From the time Catholic missionaries in the New World organized this Good Friday exercise, preaching on the words Christ spoke from the Cross has become a staple of Holy Week Catholic piety. More recently, Catholics in the United States will associate this devotional practice with the preaching of Fulton J. Sheen. For many years, Bishop Sheen filled the Church of St. Agnes in midtown Manhattan with believers eager to hear his reflections on the Seven Last Words. Sheen's preaching was biblically informed. The four Evangelists report seven final utterances that Christ spoke on the Cross. Each occupies a special place in the Catholic imagination, as they introduce believers successively into the core mysteries of the Catholic faith.

A man's final words sum up his mission. From Christ's last words, Christians through the ages have received his saving instruction. Today, Christ's final words delivered from the Cross carry special meaning. In the light of the present situation of the Church and the world, we are persuaded to acknowledge how much we need his consoling teaching. In particular, we come to recognize how much we need Christ's words that instruct on salvific suffering, the cost of redemption, and the triumph of the divine wisdom. Today's Christians need Christ's saving teaching to transcend the difficulties we face. Indeed, we need his Seven Last Words.

**THE FIRST WORD:** *"Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."*

*"When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him and the criminals there, one on his right, the other on his left. Then*

*Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.'*  
—Luke 23:33–34<sup>1</sup>

It should come as no surprise to us that the first of the Seven Last Words speaks of forgiveness. Christ's plea for the forgiveness of his executioners prompts us to consider the connection between Calvary and the Holy Mass. At every Mass, the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross is made present on the altar. Christ pleads forgiveness for his enemies, whereas at Mass we beg forgiveness for our own sins. The Mass—the re-presentation of Calvary—begins then by seeking forgiveness. With every *Kyrie* we recall this first of Christ's last words.

The sacrifice of the Cross enacts reconciliation for the world. Reconciliation is impossible without forgiveness. In praying for his enemies, Christ in fact prays for all sinners. This explains why Catholics are urged to put aside hardness of heart. The divine mercy looks for hearts open to repentance. Sin, on the other hand, stands opposed to mercy. Indeed, the divine mercy always makes it possible for us to begin again. This cry for forgiveness follows the moral instruction that Christ gives in the Sermon on the Mount. Forgive those who persecute you. Love your enemies. Be instruments of peace. When Christ begs forgiveness for us, he creates for himself a people of forgiveness. The same Lord in fact tells us to live the *Our Father*—“forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” (Matt 6:12).

Divine forgiveness places us within the logic of God. He is rich in mercy. For some people, suffering appears limitless. Some even wonder whether there will be an end to their sadness. With Christ's cry for forgiveness, we come to know the limit God places on evil. Love is stronger than death. Because of forgiveness, evil never brings closure to human life. Further, Christ's executioners thought they were fulfilling their obligations as agents of the state. Confusion had entered their judgment. Christ cites this confusion as a reason for God to forgive them. Something similar happens for us. We who are weak and confused also need God's mercy. We stand in need of God's redemption. How consoling, then, for us to hear the words, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

**THE SECOND WORD:** *“Today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Bible Revised Edition as found on the website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

*“Now one of the criminals hanging there reviled Jesus, saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us.’ The other, however, rebuking him, said in reply, ‘Have you no fear of God, for you are subject to the same condemnation? And indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ He replied to him, ‘Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.’”—Luke 23:39–43*

The words of Christ to the Good Thief penetrate the Christian imagination. The Lord’s promise—“today you will be with me in paradise”—reveals both the truth of his identity and the victory he will achieve. The exchange with the Good Thief instructs us about the God who saves. With this second last word we learn one thing for certain: the Lord knows the true nature of his mission. Were he confused or misled or otherwise ignorant about what he is doing, Christ would never have announced: “Today you will be with me in paradise.” If he were not really God, he would be unable to utter this last word. This exchange with the Good Thief confirms the full truth of the Lord’s identity: He is the God of heaven who has taken on a human face. In his humanity, he enjoys, at every instant, the grace of the beatific vision. This explains why Christ could promise paradise to the Good Thief. The promise made to the repentant thief urges us to maintain the same bold confidence in what Christ does for the world.

The Lord’s crucifixion lasted some three hours. This fact gives rise to a question: what did the Son of God made man think about that first Good Friday afternoon? The answer is simple: he thought about all of us. Thanks to his possession of the beatific vision—illustrated by the Lord’s promise of salvation to the Good Thief—Christ was not ignorant of the reason he died. He knew us and our sins. He knew every suffering and tragedy. He knew then of every plague which would scourge the face of the earth. He knew of every fear and anxiety which would grip the globe. He knew of every scandal, every impurity, and every detraction that would mar even his holy Church. Especially in our present moment, it can happen that people feel alone. They feel isolated by pandemic threats and ecclesial uncertainty. Loneliness can beget a deep suffering. With this last word, the Lord Jesus tells us we will never be alone. He knows everything. Everything you think about and dream about and worry about and cry about—all this the Lord knows. He reminds us today that he will bring us, like the Good Thief, also to paradise with him. Christ alone can pronounce the words “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

**THE THIRD WORD:** *"Behold your mother."*

*"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*

Throughout history, the words of Christ to the beloved disciple offer Christian believers an abiding consolation. The Lord entrusts his mother to Saint John the Beloved, and by extension to each of us. Here at the Cross, Mary becomes a mother to every Christian. No matter the spiritual trouble that befalls us, Our Lady opens wide her arms to receive us back. Nothing can deter her maternal mediation from embracing the worst sinners. From the day of our baptism when we were united to Mary's son, we too can claim a share in her motherhood.

When the Lord confides Mary to John, he solves the practical concern of who will look after his mother and ours. This committal answers a question that sometimes presses on us urgently. What do we do in times of distress? To whom do we turn when it seems like the world is crashing in upon us? To whom do we turn when the Church faces unfair criticism, hostile persecution, and spiritual diffidence among her members? Whatever the challenges that befall us, the remedy proves simple. Heed the Lord's instruction: "Behold your Mother." Throughout the ages, Christians' devotion to the Mother of God has sustained them in distress. Indeed, the Church invokes Our Lady as Help of Christians. Because of her Immaculate Conception, Mary shows us that God's grace precedes our every move. Frequent and even constant meditation on Our Lady's graces assures us that God takes care of us in every circumstance of life, even when the cross weighs heavily. So, the Church also invokes Mary as Comforter of the Afflicted and Refuge of Sinners.

When we turn to Mary, especially by recourse to the Holy Rosary, we come to grasp the logic of the Incarnation. The world revolves around the Annunciation. God is not distant from us. He has not abandoned us to our own devices. God is not silent, even in the face of evil. The mystery of Christ taking flesh in the womb of Mary demonstrates that God draws close to us. Because Christ is like us in all things but sin, he comes into the world through a woman. And on the Cross, he shows his goodness by sharing this woman with us. It happens that Christian believers, and even non-believers, are sometimes tempted to doubt God's love for the world. Some even wonder about his existence. When this happens, Our Lady

stands out as a shining beacon. As so many images of Our Lady display, Mary holds up her son as if to say, “here he is.” In Bethlehem, she swaddles the infant Christ. At Cana, she points out the public Christ. And on Calvary, she holds the dead Christ. This final holding reminds us that the Lord has taken on our sufferings. So, in every distress, Christians do well to fulfill the Lord’s command, “Behold your Mother” (John 19:27).

**THE FOURTH WORD:** *“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”*

*“From noon onward, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 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?’”—Matthew 27:45–46*

This plaintive last word reveals the full depth of what Christ did to accomplish our salvation. These words of the twenty-second psalm stand as a great expression of the suffering of Israel. As his listeners would have recognized, this psalm concludes with words that express the psalmist’s certain knowledge of redemption. The psalmist expresses an unwavering hope that God will save Israel. The Church, of course, makes this psalm her own. She knows that the sufferings of the people of Israel—like her own—can include feelings of abandonment. Still, she knows that God never abandons his people.

To understand this fourth word of Christ one should recognize that the Psalter is Israel’s spiritual book. As the Old Testament makes clear, Israel comes forth as a community of persons. Indeed, the Psalms pray with a corporate voice. Individualistic spiritualities remain foreign to them. No psalm shows much concern for how such and such an event affects the individual or how he or she feels about a particular experience. Instead, the person who prays the Psalms prays in the name of the whole nation. The Book of Psalms belongs to a formed community. The Fathers of the Church tell us that to pray the Psalms unites us with the sentiments and the sufferings of all people. In other words, the Psalms express all human experience and every human emotion. Even today, the Church places the Psalms on the lips of every priest and consecrated person, every nun and monk, and others who take on the duty to pray the Psalms daily. Further, every Catholic who participates in the Mass prays the Psalms. One therefore may opine that the Psalms stand close to the heart of Christian prayer. The Christian believer is not surprised then to hear psalm verses coming from the mouth of the dying Christ.

On Calvary, the Son of God takes to himself every human suffering, every heartache and anguish, every pain and torture, every loss and death. On his Cross, the Lord of glory offers his submission to sin's terrors to the heavenly Father, who receives it as satisfaction for us. This satisfaction, as the choice of Psalms indicates, sanctifies the sufferings of men and women throughout the ages. When Christ says, "My God, My God, why have you abandoned me," he speaks for the people of all time. These include those who lived before Christ, beginning with Adam, and all those who will be born until the end of the world. Christ's death brings consolation to a fallen race. This means that, when we are moved to exclaim, "My God, My God, why have you abandoned me," whatever causes our distress should never lead to despair. Instead, as the end of this psalm indicates: "The generation to come will be told of the Lord, that they may proclaim to a people yet unborn the deliverance you have brought" (Ps 22:32).

**THE FIFTH WORD: "I thirst."**

*"After this, aware that everything was now finished, in order that the scripture might be fulfilled, Jesus said, 'I thirst.' There was a vessel filled with common wine. So, they put a sponge soaked in wine on a sprig of hyssop and put it up to his mouth."—John 19:28–29*

The work of the Missionaries of Charity spans the globe. The members of this religious community founded by Mother Teresa of Calcutta are known for their distinctive white habit and blue-rimmed sari. Every convent of theirs appears the same. There are no pews—the floor suffices. They boast of no expensive art, for simplicity reigns. One thing that appears everywhere—upon which Mother Teresa insisted—are the two words written beside the Cross. We find engraved in each chapel of the Missionaries of Charity the words "I thirst." Mother Teresa has made these last words of Christ sound throughout the world. "I thirst" reveals Christ's thirst for souls. Mother Teresa believed that this cry of Christ exposes a deep truth about God and his love for us. The God who made the universe thirsts for our souls. He wants us to be united with him. Indeed, he wants for every person of every time and place to experience his love.

Christ's thirst for souls is satisfied each time a person comes to know him and to love him. So much then do these words belong beside the Cross. On the Cross Christ shows his great thirst for souls. He is willing to pay any price to redeem mankind. "I thirst for you," says the Lord of glory. "I want to embrace both your heart and mind. Why? I want you to be

with me for eternity.” God’s answer to human suffering is not to remove it, but to embrace it. In Christ, he takes it on himself. His divine thirst is not quenched with spiced wine or vinegar, but with souls eager to grow in love. Poor sinners satisfy Christ’s thirst when we trust in his love for us. When Christ cries out in thirst, he really instructs us: “Offer me your love every day.” Realize his love for you as he says, “I thirst” (John 19:28).

**THE SIXTH WORD:** *“It is finished.”*

*“When Jesus had taken the wine, he said, ‘It is finished.’ And bowing his head, he handed over the spirit.”—John 19:30*

This final word of Christ as recorded in St. John’s Gospel raises a question: What is finished on Calvary? In order to know what Christ accomplishes on Calvary, we must pay close attention to authentic Catholic teaching. Even some Christians miss the point. They erroneously believe, for example, that the Cross of Christ offers one optional path to redemption. Others labor under an illusion that human beings can devise their own path to salvation. The Church, however, teaches otherwise. Each Sunday she emphatically proclaims that only the sacrifice of Christ makes heaven possible for a fallen human race. Only the Lord Jesus can make such a promise. “It is finished” translates into “a new life has begun.”

Today, many people fail to realize they stand in need of a redeemer. Some wrongly claim independence from God and his saving work. The recent pandemic may have served as a wake-up call. We have all witnessed how fragile human life can become. The contingency of the created world has been made manifest. Our dependency on life-saving treatments points to a higher dependence. To put it otherwise, we cannot heal our bodies by ourselves. Neither can we save ourselves by ourselves. Only Christ’s blood poured out and his body broken opens heaven’s gate. His self-giving love completes the work of salvation. Only on Calvary—and there alone—is accomplished human redemption, is achieved our restoration, and truth to tell, is solved the mystery of human existence. Thus, the Church prays: “By your Cross and Resurrection you have set us free.” On Calvary, Christ proclaims that sin and death are defeated even as the blood and water that flows from his side supplies new life to the world. Indeed, here on Calvary, “It is finished” (John 19:30).

**THE SEVENTH WORD:** *“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”*

*“Then the veil of the temple was torn down the middle. Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit’; and when he had said this, he breathed his last.”—Luke 23:45–46*

This seventh word of Christ opens up the inner life of the Trinity. In his humanity the eternal Son of God commits himself wholly to the heavenly Father. Because he knows the effect of his Passion, Christ confidently turns to his loving and merciful Father. In this self-commendation, Christ gives an example to each of us. So, no matter what circumstances threaten us, we usefully make the words of Christ our own: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” We place our trust in God. We acknowledge in faith his saving plan and so we abandon ourselves to his divine providence. The difficult lesson each Catholic much learn is that, whatever challenges face the Church or the world, their resolution lies only in accord with the divine wisdom.

This seventh word of Christ on the Cross offers a profound consolation. When we say, “Into your hands Father,” we commit everything to God. We commend ourselves, our sufferings, our sadnesses, and our anxieties about both the Church and the world, we offer them all to the divine wisdom and mercy. In response to every challenge the Church faces—whether from infidelity, doctrinal confusion, or liturgical dispute—we do well first to recall this final word of Christ. Like Christ, we give over everything to God. The unity of Christ’s human will with that of his heavenly Father strengthens us. Specifically, Christ gives us the grace to hand over our own lives in their entirety to the love and mercy of God. This grace comes to the rescue especially for those facing the moment of death. Christ renders possible this grace for us as he declares, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:45). N·V