

THE CATHOLIC HOUR



THE SEVEN LAST WORDS

BY

THE MOST REVEREND
FULTON J. SHEEN, D.D.

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National Council of Catholic Men
1312 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.
Washington 5, D. C.



THE SEVEN LAST WORDS

The greatest farewell discourse in the history of the world was delivered from the pulpit of the Cross, in the Cathedral of Golgotha, on the Friday called Good. Though Sacred Scripture covers thousands of years and the living words of hundreds of holy men and women, only the dying sayings of three are published in full.

The first of these is Israel, the second is Moses, the third is Stephen. Each of these had a very special function in the providential ordering of the world. Israel was the first of the Israelites; Moses was the first in the legal dispensation; Stephen was the first martyr. The dying words of each of this glorious trio either initiate the mystery that leads to the Cross, or else like Stephen, reflect it. But no ears ever caught the whispers of dying men, as did the Gospels when they took from out of the air of Calvary, the seven chords of the symphony of Redemption.

The seven utterances of Our Lord from the Cross do not fit into the human category, for it is God in the form of man Who is surrendering His life. A Saviour is not to be confounded with the saved, nor a martyr with a Redeemer. Never was there a preacher like the dying Lord on the Cross; never a congregation like Calvary's, and

never a theme like the Seven Last Words.

Once on Calvary Our Blessed Lord is stripped of His garments. It was only five days before they stripped themselves of their own garments to strew them in His path. Now it is His own seamless robe they divest to open anew the drying scabs of the scourging, that He might be clothed in His own blood. He extends His hands to His executioners—those Hands from which the world's graces flow. The first dull knock of the hammer is heard in silence, blow follows blow and is distinctly re-echoed from the city walls beneath; Mary and John hold their ears for the sound is unendurable, the echo sounded as another stroke. The Cross is lifted slowly off the ground, and with a thud that seems to shake even Hell itself, it sinks into the pit prepared for it. Our Blessed Lord has mounted His pulpit for the last time.

In such a moment, many have protested their innocence or condemned their executioners or shrieked with pain, but He, like a tree that bathes with perfume the axe that cuts it, lets fall from His lips His First Word: "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing." Generally, when anyone does us wrong or harms us, we withdraw our love and take it

back. Love once given was never meant to be taken back—it endures even though it is rejected. Our Blessed Lord never took back His Love. He even makes ignorance a plea for our forgiveness. It is not Wisdom that saves; it is ignorance. If they knew what they were doing, namely taking the life of Truth Itself, nailing the Son of God to a tree, exiling Him from this earth that He had made, and still went on doing it, they would never be saved; they would be damned. It was only ignorance of what they were doing that brought them within the pale of the cry of the Cross. We are more ignorant than we know!

Two thieves were crucified on either side of Our Blessed Lord, and at the beginning of their crucifixion, both of them reviled and blasphemed. One of the thieves however, either because He heard the forgiving word of Our Lord, or else because of the spiritual loveliness of His Mother at the foot of the Cross, had his heart enkindled by sparks of cooperation with grace. Looking at the man on the central Cross, he saw His crown of thorns as a royal diadem, His nail as a sceptre, and His Blood as royal purple, and His Crucifixion an enthronement. Calling Him Lord, he says: "Remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." He asked once, sought once, knocked once, and was saved on the last day of his life. Our Lord did not breathe a word about the thief's past evil life.

We would probably have recalled his wicked career, but a Saviour would not do that. The Lord knew that no one turns to Him except when his heart is already broken. The proud men stay away. When poor souls turn to Him it is not smiting they need, but healing.

In answer Our Lord assured him that his sins would no longer be remembered, but he would be remembered as there came from the lips of Our Blessed Saviour the answer: "I promise thee, This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise." And the thief died a thief, for he stole Paradise. Heaven can be stolen again.

At the foot of the Cross was John, but as the Gospel now notes: "And meanwhile his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalen had taken their stand beside the Cross of Jesus." Magdalen was prostrate, but Mary stood, as if to indicate an active participation in the Redemptive act of her Divine Son. Love always craves nearness; the bird cleaves the storm to reach its nest, and the mother ignores the scorning multitude to be near her Dying Son. Our Blessed Lord looked down from that Cross to the two most beloved creatures that He had on earth, John and His Mother. Thirty-three years before she had brought forth her first born and laid Him in a manger. The first Annunciation to her was from an angel who announces that she was to become the Mother of God made man; this sec-

ond Annunciation is not from an angel, but from Our Divine Lord Himself, as He announces that she is to be the Mother of all whom He will redeem, as He confers on her the title of Universal Motherhood: He calls her "Woman"—the same title given by God in Genesis to the one who would crush the head of the serpent. The first nativity was in Bethlehem, the second nativity is at the Cross. Our Lord was her first born, born in joy; John was her second born, as Our Blessed Lord says to Mary concerning him: "This is thy son." Then to John: "This is thy mother." Mary was to have other children besides Our Blessed Lord, not of the flesh but of the spirit; she was to be mother of all who would be one in Christ. Since John was unnamed, he in his anonymity, he stood for us; in her charge He placed all of us. If we are one in Christ, then Mary is our Mother! It is a terrible thing for a man not to know His Heavenly Father; it is equally serious not to know His Heavenly Mother. As I believe Our Lord when He said: "This is My Body" so I believe Him when He says: "This is your Mother."

The obscuring of the sun is always associated with the evil of the world, and at the moment Our Blessed Lord speaks His next word the sun hides itself as if ashamed to shed its light upon the crime of Deicide. That He might redeem atheists, He permitted Himself to feel their unhappiness; that He might save

Communists, He allowed His soul to be flooded with their sadness and isolation; that He might redeem sinners, He allowed their loneliness, emptiness, anxiety and fears to so possess His soul as to feel Himself separated from His Father. In order that there would be no human being in the world who would ever have an agony or a pain which He Himself did not suffer, He willed to deny Himself the light of His Divine nature from falling upon His human nature, as the clouds sometimes darken the base of a mountain, while the peak is bathed in sunlight.

Out of this darkness comes the cry: "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Never again could man say: "God does not know what I have to suffer," for He is a God Who has taken His own medicine. If Our Lord cried to His Father in the midst of adversity then let no one ever despair in the midst of his darkness and anxiety.

"Trust Him when dark doubts
assail thee

Trust Him when trust is small
Trust Him, when simply to
trust Him

Is the hardest thing of all."

In the fifth word Our Blessed Lord utters the shortest of His seven cries. It is not a word of reproach to His apostles, not a judgment upon His executioners, not a word of hope to Magdalen, not even a prayer to His Heavenly Father. At this particular moment it is a plea to man. He, from Whose fingertips tumbled planets and worlds, He Who

threw stars into their orbits and spheres into space now asks man, a piece of His own handiwork, to help him; he asks man for a drink, as there wells up from His Sacred Heart the cry: "I thirst."

It was not a thirst for water alone, for He had made the great depths of the sea and the fountains of the earth. It was a thirst for souls. As St. Augustine said: "I thirst to be thirsted for." It was the most pathetic love cry in the history of the world. We who have almost forgotten we have souls to save cannot understand this poignant yearning of God for souls! He wants our love, the love of the one billion pagans in the world today for whom our missionaries are spending themselves. But we are reluctant to be loved! Very often when He would lift us up to His love, like children, picked up by their elders, we squirm and shriek: "Let me down." But He is willing to be patient, so patient as to win our love. Even though we give our young bones to the world, He is still willing to take the dry bones to Himself. Why is it when He asked for a drink of love, we give Him vinegar and gall? If it is not His Goodness that will draw us to Him, then let our weariness cast us to His Sacred Breast.

When Our Lord had spoken concerning His thirst, a soldier reached Him vinegar which had already been prophesied in the Old Testament. He knew that the Scriptures were fulfilled, and

He now spoke His sixth word: "It is finished." This does not mean, "Thank God this is over," but rather "All that has been written concerning Me in the Holy Writ of the Old Testament is now completed and accomplished." All the sacrifices of sheep and goats that prefigured this sacrifice, all the types of Calvary, such as Abraham ready to offer his son Isaac in sacrifice, all the innocent lambs whose blood was poured out in the Temple in the four directions of the earth — all these shadows could now vanish, for here was the substance accomplished. The Sacrifice of the Immaculate Lamb of God, the Price of man's Redemption was paid. This was the cry of victory, the trumpeting of a work accomplished. While those at the foot of the Cross are saying: "He is a failure," in the midst of that bedlam He brings to a triumphant conclusion the most glorious thing ever done in the universe.

He has finished His work, but we must apply it to ourselves. The new ark is built against the flood of sin, but we must enter it; He has laid the foundation, but we must add ourselves as brick to brick in the cement of love. So long as sin endures, there will be something unfinished about our lives and our world. "I saw the Son of God go by

Crowned with the crown of thorn.

'Was it not finished, Lord?'

I said,

'And all the anguish borne?'

He turned on me His awful eyes:
‘Hast thou not understood?
Lo! Every soul is Calvary,
And every sin a rood.’ ”

The previous word was manward, this last word is Godward. The one was in retrospect, this in prospect; the other a farewell to earth, this an entrance into heaven. Just as the planets, only after a long period of time, complete their orbits and then go back again to their starting points, as if to salute Him Who sent them on their way, so too He the prodigal son now having finished the course of His Life, after having wasted His substance in this foreign country of earth, now prepares to go again to the Father's House. He often had said: "No man takes My Life away from Me, but I lay it down of Myself." Death does not come to Him: He goes out to meet it! To indicate that He was surrendering His Life, not being dispossessed of it, His last word is uttered in a loud voice: "Father, into thy hands I commend My Spirit." There is a rupture of a heart, through a rapture of love, and He bows His head and gives up His spirit!

After His Death a centurion takes his spear and runs it into the side of Our Divine Lord. But that spear pierced two hearts; the heart of Our Lord on the Cross and the heart of His Mother beneath it. It drew blood and water from one, and sorrow from the other. Thirty-two years before, when the Babe was in arms, Simeon had told here: "A

sword thy own heart shall pierce." The centurion might just as well have pulled it out of the side of Our Lord and plunged it into her own heart, for on Calvary now are two pierced hearts.

Our Lord is now taken down from the Cross and laid in the arms of His Blessed Mother! Centuries and centuries before the first Eve took in her lap the lifeless form of Abel slain by his jealous brother Cain. Now the new Eve, Mary, with her lap as a kind of paten holds Him Whom Abel foreshadowed.

To a Mother, no Son ever grows up. As the Blessed Mother holds her Divine Son in her arms, through her tear-dimmed eyes it seems that Bethlehem has come back again, for her child is in her arms!

Mary! This is not Bethlehem! This is Calvary! He is no longer white as He came from the Father, but red as He came from us! The Crib has become the Cross; the Myrrh brought by the Wise Men for His death, Thou canst use now. All other arms are closed to Him at this moment; Thy arms alone are open! Roses turn against Him and gave Him thorns; Trees turned against Him and gave Him a Cross; the bowels of the earth rebelled and gave Him nails; men turned against Him and gave Him death. Carpentered by his own profession; rejected by those whom He made, Thou for the moment art the only one to receive Him! To gain me as a son,

Thou didst have to lose Him! It was a poor exchange Mary!

But Mary, Thou still hast thy work to do. As Thou didst form the human nature of Jesus in Thy Body, so also art Thou to

form the spirit of Jesus in our souls. As a Mother can never forget the child of her womb, so neither canst Thou ever forget us, the children of Thy sorrow!

THE CATHOLIC HOUR

1930—Twenty-second Year—1952

The nationwide Catholic Hour was inaugurated on March 2, 1930, by the National Council of Catholic Men in cooperation with the National Broadcasting Company and its associated stations. Radio facilities are contributed by NBC and the stations associated with it; the program is arranged and produced by NCCM.

The Catholic Hour was begun on a network of 22 stations, and now carries its message of Catholic truth on each Sunday of the year on over 143 stations, the largest number of stations to carry the Catholic Hour in its entire history. There are now only 23 NBC stations not carrying the Catholic Hour. The Catholic Hour has distinguished itself as one of the most popular and extensive broadcasts in the world. An average of 100,000 audience letters a year, about twenty per cent of which come from listeners of other faiths, gives some indication of its popularity and influence.

A complimentary copy of each talk is sent gratis to listeners. The cost of printing prevents a wider free distribution. Additional copies may be obtained at 10c per copy. Reduced rates for copies in bulk are available.

Listeners may obtain one talk per week for a year at a cost of \$5.00.

Each series of talks in booklet form is also available at the end of the series.

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