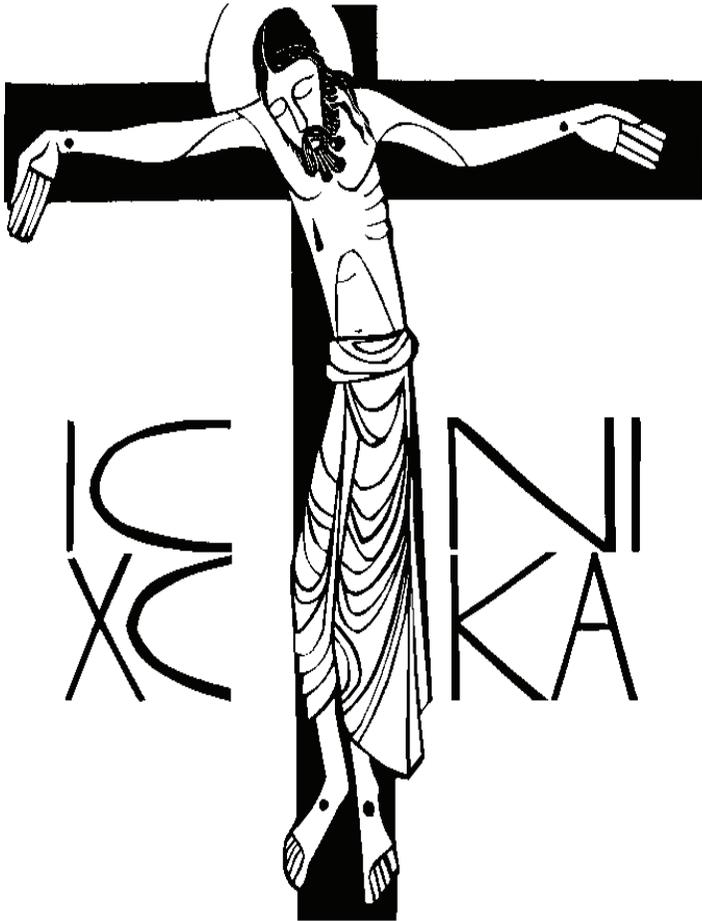


TRE ORE

Three Hours of the Lord's Agony on the Cross

SEVEN LAST WORDS OF CHRIST



Introduction

Good Friday is a day marked by sorrow and mourning. In the nineteenth century, the three hours that Jesus hung upon the cross came to be known as the *Tre Ore*—the time from noon until 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Those solemn hours are ideal for meditation and restrained praise. In Peru, where the *Tre Ore* custom began, the focus of meditation would be upon The Seven Last Words (or Statements) made by Jesus while hanging on the cross. This is a time to watch and pray, to stand at the foot of the cross with Jesus, the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and John the Beloved Disciple, as the Son of God obtains salvation for the whole world and unites us by his passion to God the Father, the Author of all life and everything that is good.

The Three Hours of the Agony of Our Lord Jesus Christ

The Lord's agony on the cross, certainly entailed great physical suffering and immense pain. Yet, while those are the primary elements of His agony, the physical torments are only one aspect. In origin, the word agony meant a struggle or a contest akin to inner emotional grappling or a wrestling match; thus, Christ's agony in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross is a reference to the combat He engaged in with Satan and the forces of evil that were at work, then and still now. The Lord's real agony either began in the Garden with Satan taking the initiative, wherein the Evil One sought to turn back the progress the Son of Man had made by working through Jewish and Roman leaders or that earlier agony in the Garden was a preparation for Christ's true agony on the cross.

1

Pater, dimitte illis, quia nesciunt, quid faciunt Luke 23, 33-34

And when they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him and the criminals there, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" They divided his garments by casting lots.

In the Gospel of Luke, after Jesus hung upon the cross at the Place of the Skull with the two other criminals, He said, "***Father, forgive them, know not what they do***" (Lk 23,34). In His last moments as a man on the earth, Jesus was living out or exemplifying what He had said so often, namely, that mercy must precede forgiveness. God is easily understood as a vengeful deity and even after repeatedly claiming that the merciful will obtain mercy or that God is a merciful Father, Jesus had to embody mercy toward those who crucified Him. Mercy has two distinct degrees which could be classified as *lesser* and *greater*. In its lesser form, you might give alms to the poor or help someone who is in need of your assistance, yet there is no personal offense that requires forgiveness. In the greater (or more perfect) form of mercy, there is a legitimate reason (*viz.* a personal offense) to justify being vengeful but the aggrieved party forsakes that justifiable reaction. This greater type of mercy is portrayed to a maximum degree in the crucifixion. In order for anyone to be spared from sin and depravity, you have to look to Christ on the cross and imi-

tate what He did. Because God the Father is merciful to those who are merciful and forgiving to those who are forgiving, mercy and forgiveness are intimately linked due to the fact that mercy constitutes the essence of what it means to forgive. Yet, Jesus' plea to God the Father to forgive His tormentors did not automatically result in those who crucified Jesus being forgiven. No, repentance and the acknowledgement that sin has ensnared the human heart are the prerequisites to forgiveness. God demands that we extend mercy to those who have offended us, but the offending party or the sinner must repent of the evil done. This plaintive cry from the cross, on the lips of Jesus, begging God the Father to forgive His crucifiers exemplifies the attitude of forgiveness that is the fruit of a merciful heart. These words constitute the ultimate seal on the earthly life of Christ—He was merciful to the end and His mercy was, therefore God-like, because Jesus was endlessly merciful. Saint Gregory the Great in his *Moral Reflections on Job* wrote, "Christ suffered without sin on his hands, for he committed no sin and deceit was not found on his lips. Yet he suffered the pain of the cross for our redemption. His prayer to God was pure, his alone out of all mankind, for in the midst of his suffering he prayed for his persecutors: *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*. Is it possible to offer, or even to imagine, a purer kind of prayer than that which shows mercy to one's torturers by making intercession for them? It was thanks to this kind of prayer that the frenzied persecutors who shed the blood of our Redeemer drank it afterward in faith and proclaimed him to be the Son of God."

2

Hodie mecum eris in Paradiso Luke 23, 39-43

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 receive corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal. Then he replied, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." [Jesus] replied to him, "*Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*"

The two thieves, one on the Lord's right and the other on His left, saw their desperate situation in two entirely different ways. To the Good Thief who rebuked his companion, Jesus said, "***Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise***" (Lk 23,43). Jesus was crucified between those thieves, who serve as examples of the two ways we can respond to suffering and how believers should relate to Christ who suffered for our salvation. They are alike in that both thieves are guilty, they both are doomed to die on their own cross and, as such, their punishment fits their crimes, yet they do not want to die. The bad thief blasphemes Jesus and taunts Him. Even though this man will legitimately suffer, he seeks relief without any acknowledgment of his

guilt nor does he ask for forgiveness. Moreover, this doomed thief misunderstands the very notion of a suffering Messiah. Conversely, the repentant thief rebukes his partner in crime. Often called Dismas, this man was awed by what was happening to Jesus. He admits the sins he has committed and, furthermore, he knows that he deserves what is happening to him. Then, he acknowledges what he believes to be true about Jesus—He is innocent and the true King. He, too, seeks to be saved, but Jesus tells this repentant thief that he will be with this Suffering Servant of God in Paradise. The Greek word for Paradise (Gk. *παραδείσω*) is only used, here, in any of the Gospels. When the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek (viz. the Septuagint or LXX), *paradeiso* was used for the Garden of Eden. Yet, it also could mean the abode of the dead; hence, the good thief’s confession of personal guilt, opens up the way to forgiveness of sins and a future life.

3

Mulier, ecce filius tuus John 19, 26-27

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, “Women, behold, your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.

In a simple, yet profound act, Jesus entrusts His mother into the care of John the Beloved Disciple. In Catholic belief, this goes beyond merely finding Mary an earthly protector to safeguard her against the dangers which were inherent when a woman had neither husband nor son. Instead, these words “signify that the motherhood of [Mary] who bore Christ finds a ‘new’ continuation in the Church and through the Church, symbolized and represented by John. In this way, she who was the ‘one full of grace’ was brought into the mystery of Christ in order to be his Mother and thus the Holy Mother of God, through the Church remains in that mystery as ‘the woman’ spoken of by the Book of Genesis (3:12) at the beginning and by the Apocalypse (12:1) at the end of the history of salvation. In accord with the eternal plan of Providence, Mary’s divine motherhood is to be poured out upon the Church, as indicated by statements of Tradition, according to which Mary’s motherhood of the Church is the reflection and extension of her motherhood of the Son of God” (*Redemptoris mater*, n. 24). Throughout her life and even during this last ordeal, Mary never wavered in the faith she first placed in God and that the promises made to her by the angel would be fulfilled. Mary, as Mother of God and Mother of the Church, is the purest realization of the faith in the power of the cross. We turn to Mary, as the perfect witness of faith, who walked into the “night of faith” and, so, her earthly motherhood dies with Christ. Then, in sharing in her Son’s paschal mystery and having suffered for the soon-to-be-born Church, in this statement from her Son’s own lips, Mary rises to a new maternity as Mother of all the disciples of her Son. “Virgin Mary,

Mother of God and Mother of the Church, hear the prayers of your suffering children and grant us a greater share in the eternal life that your Son won for us on the cross. Pray for us, O holy Mother of God, that we may become worthy of the promises of Christ your Son.”

4

Deus meus, Deus meus, utquid dereliquisti me? Mark 15, 34
 And at three o'clock, Jesus cried out in aloud voice, “*Eloi, eloi, lema sabachtani?*” Which is translated, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*”

According to the way that the passage of time was marked in the first century, this was the ninth hour; Jesus had hung upon the cross for six agonizing hours. This is the most poignant of the seven sayings of Jesus and the only one preserved in the original Aramaic language and it also was given immediately in *Koine* or New Testament Greek. In Aramaic, the word *šabaqtanî* is a composite word—as a verb it means “to allow, to permit, to forgive, or to forsake” and with the object suffix added to it, viz. me, you can translate that compound verb either as *abandoned me* or *forsaken me*. The phrase is the opening line of Psalm 22 (LXX 21): “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” Several other elements of this psalm are either quoted or alluded to during the Lord’s passion. This profound lament is found in both the Gospel of Saint Matthew and that of Saint Mark; some of the bystanders who heard Jesus cry out conclude that He is calling upon the prophet Elijah (Mt 27, 47). The Christian interpretation of that psalm believes it to be a prophecy of the Lord’s suffering (Ps 22, 14-18), provides us with His message (vv. 25-32) and promises the Lord’s ultimate exaltation. In this one question, Jesus could be understood as announcing the whole good news of salvation at the precise moment when all creation is posed to be redeemed. This psalm was read as the prophecy of an heir to King David and also concerns a son of God. The early Church saw in it a similar promise and believed its fulfillment took place when Jesus uttered it on the cross. Then, it was about Jesus, *the* Son of God and the Davidic heir. It is approaching the ninth hour — the time fixed by the eternal decree of God for the death of the God-Man. The feeling of abandonment which had caused the Redeemer to suffer agony in the garden, the evening before, now returns. Jesus has freely taken upon Himself the sins of the world; so, the whole weight of God’s justice now presses upon His soul. The bitter chalice of divine anger, which Jesus is drinking to its very dregs, exhorts from the Lord’s lips a plaintive cry: “*Eloi, eloi, lema sabachtani?*”

5

Sitio John 19,28

After this, aware that everything was now finished, in order that the scripture might be fulfilled, Jesus said, “*I thirst.*”

Is this a physical or spiritual cry? Certainly, any human body that had been hanging on the cross for six hours would have been so ravaged by the sheer labor of breathing, not to mention the loss of blood through the wounds in His hands and feet, that Jesus had to have an unquenchable thirst. Yet this was more a lament because there was a spiritual craving that what He was doing would really make the ultimate difference; however, there was no guarantee that His dying would make the slightest difference. Moreover, in order for the Paraclete or Spirit to come down from the Father, Jesus had to die in order to be raised from the dead and return to the right hand of God. Then and only then would the power and life of the Spirit be unleashed upon the disciples. Now, though, physically distraught and spiritually at His lowest point, plagued by aridity in both body and soul, the price of salvation and the personal cost to Him seemed to be too much to bear.

In the *Revelations of Divine Love*, Blessed Julian of Norwich was privileged to receive several divine revelations. In the eighth of those, she contemplated the sufferings that Christ endured as He hung upon the cross and the physical impact crucifixion exacted upon His divine face. She wrote, “I saw his dear face, dry, bloodless and pallid with death...for me his passion was shown primarily through his blessed face, and particularly by his lips.” Having said that, she goes on to describe her understanding of the words “I thirst:”

His thirst: his love and longing for us that goes on enduring until the Day of Judgment...His thirst and loving longing is to have us all, integrated in him, to his great enjoyment.

This fourteenth century Christian mystic believed that Jesus was thirsty in both a physical and spiritual sense. She equates the Lord’s thirst in terms of a *loving longing*. Yet, the soldiers only understood His request on the physical level; thus, they gave Jesus “wine to drink mixed with gall. But when he had tasted it, he refused to drink” (Mt 27, 34). This could be an inexact allusion to Psalm 69, 22: “Instead they put gall in my food; for my thirst they gave me vinegar.” Yet knowing thirst on the physical level was part of Christ’s humanity; however, the spiritual thirst (or loving longing) sprang from the dying Savior’s divine nature. The Lord knew that He had to surrender His life as the ultimate act of trust in God. Thus, the physical deficit that human nature was heir to because of the original act of disobedience was overcompensated for with His death and He longed or thirsted for the human race to trust in God the Father in the same way that He did.

6

Consummatum est John 19,30

When Jesus had taken the wine, he said, “*It is finished.*” And bowing his

head, he handed over his spirit.

The moment is now at hand when Jesus must yield His soul to God the Father. He has fulfilled all that the prophets had foretold, even that of receiving vinegar when He was parched with thirst. Jesus now only had to abandon Himself to the specter of death. His head bends forward toward His chest, His eyes begin to close, and His lips become cold and livid. But that He might show to the world that He died because He was willing to do so, in order to teach all who followed Him how to die well after having taught us how to live well, at that moment when the dying lose their ability or willingness to speak, Jesus, the Son of God, the Word-Made-Flesh, lifts up His head, opens His eyes, and squarely fixing them on heaven, He declares His agony to be almost over. Those three English words, “it is finished,” in fact, are only one word in the original Greek language (Gk. τετέλεσται) of the Gospel of John – Telesthai! Throughout the ages, this has often been declared to be the greatest single word ever uttered! Now, after reaching the final moments in the work of salvation, having come to the point of abject surrender to God, Jesus is not simply declaring that His life is over. No, He is declaring that His suffering on the cross is at an end—the salvation of the world that God had created and declared to be good would soon be good once more. And, because of this ultimate act, the mission that Jesus had been given by God the Father has been brought to an end. Salvation is finally at hand. By His suffering and death, Jesus has not only passed the test of faith that Adam had failed; His obedience unto death made the Risen Christ the head of an entirely new human race. This one death, once-and-for-all, paid the price of Adam’s sin, was the supreme act of expiation and propitiation (viz. satisfaction required by the holiness of God) and brought redemption from the twin curse of sin and death, while reconciling heaven above to the earth below. The decisive phase in salvation has been fulfilled; then, three days later, God the Father will signal His approval of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross by raising Jesus from the dead.

7

In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meo Luke 23, 44-46
It was now about noon and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon because of an eclipse of the sun. 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.

Now, the only thing that remains is for death to come. The Lord’s dying is destined to put the finishing stroke on the world’s redemption which the prophets had assured us would be true, especially for those who would listen to them and believe that Jesus is both the Lamb of God and the Son of God. So, as both God and man, Jesus had to die. His body and

human spirit were worn out by the three hours of intense agony that He endured. His other words were barely audible to those who stood at the foot of the cross, now, Jesus utters a loud cry which is heard at a great distance off and it fills those who heard it with fear and utter astonishment. These final words of Jesus are taken from another one of the psalms: "Into your hands I will commend (or commit) my spirit; you will redeem me, Lord, faithful God" (Ps 31, 5). These words underscore the complete trust and total confidence Jesus had in God His Father. The prospect of death is the supreme—you could say even the ultimate—threat to faith and trust that any one must face in this life. Yet, faith is the only antidote to such a fearful, unknown prospect. When the end of life rears its head, after placing our trust in God, then abandonment or self-surrender is what must follow. Jesus died without knowing that He would be raised from the dead; yet, His faith in God the Father was paramount. Death can be perceived as abhorrent—a horror to flee from at all costs—or death can be an act of faith that the glorified life which is Christ's to bestow will be ours. The common understanding of the word abandonment is not its true spiritual meaning. Putting ourselves into God's hands—abandonment—is the purposefully denying the way we want the plan of salvation to be carried out and, then, trusting in God alone. The uncertain future that Jesus faced did not cause Him to despair; no, He placed His fate in God the Father's hands and this last of the seven words serves to correct any misconception that there was desperation in the preceding words. God will complete the plan He has in mind in a far better and more wonderful way than even our best-laid plans. It is in the unexpected—like the Lord's resurrection from the dead—or the sometimes tragic, even painful twists that life throws our way that should not assail the hope we must have that sin and death are destroyed.

Blessed Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916)

Prayer of Abandonment

Father, I abandon myself into your hands;
do with me what you will.

Whatever you may do, I thank you:

I am ready for all, I accept all

Let only your will be done in me,
and in all your creatures -

I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul:

I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.