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Christ's Last Agony

His Seven Words

By

REV. HENRY E. O'KEEFFE, C.S.P.



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CHRIST'S LAST AGONY

His Seven Words

Meditative Sermons for Public and
Private Devotion

By
REV. HENRY E. O'KEEFFE
of the Paulist Fathers

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Christ's Last Agony

"Then therefore Pilate delivered Him to them to be crucified. And they took Jesus, and led Him forth. And bearing His own Cross, He went forth to that place which is called *Calvary*, but in Hebrew *Golgotha*. Where they crucified Him, and with Him two others, one on each side, and Jesus in the midst. And Pilate wrote a title also, and he put it upon the Cross. And the writing was: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. This title, therefore, many of the Jews did read: because the place where Jesus was crucified was nigh to the city. And it was written in Hebrew, in Greek, and in Latin." —(John xix. 16-20.)

IN Christ's Last Agony, there is the agony of every dying man. Hence it has a moral value for contemplation for every man that lives and will die. Christianity is the only creed that attempts to lend succor to suffering humanity, because it holds up the virtue of dignified composure even in the grasp of torture, manifested in Christ Who is both Eternal and Divine. It shows Him endowed with the virtue of courage at the crucial moment of the soul's struggle. When the tide of desolation reached the breaking point, He did not morally break, even though physically and literally He died of a broken Heart when the soldier plunged a spear in His Side: "They shall look upon Me Whom they have pierced."

This fact, although it gives no thorough reason for the existence of suffering, at least manifests the comforting truth that Christ in some unthinkable and preëminent manner has suffered to the final degree of dereliction. He has shown us that there must be something sweet and meritorious even in the bitterness and indignity of human suffering. There is, moreover, solace in the thought, especially for the abandoned, the sick, the sorrowing and the lonely, that Christ, the Manifestation of God, has suffered and suffers with every suffering soul: "I will draw all things to Myself."

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Therefore His Death is not merely unique in its expression of the profoundest suffering, but it is living and universal in its moral application. Unless we begin our meditation on Christ's Last Agony with the knowledge of this truth, our devotions may be, if not futile in deep spiritual results, certainly not radical nor vital enough to reconstruct our lives with this new and meritorious aspect of human misery.

If a sharp pain mercilessly shoots from head to foot through my trembling body, my first impulse is to revolt and fight against it. But if at the period of my keenest misery I unite my suffering with the suffering of Christ, immediately its very harshness has been put under moral control, and it takes on a serviceable merit which of itself it could never possess: "I fill up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ."

Moreover, we are allowed to believe from the most approved teaching that He Who was Light as well as Truth, passed not only through all the harrowing processes of sorrow, but likewise through the more subtle disintegration of doubt. He suffered that more terrific agony of mind not only in the Garden of Gethsemane, but on the Hill of Calvary. Since He came out of the fire unscathed, He is for us, indeed, "the Light which enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world," when we grope in the obscurity of doubt or are harassed by difficulties or temptations against Faith.

Christ's Passion is a personal concern for each sufferer because Christ is in the sufferer, whether his sufferings arise from moral or even intellectual causes. In the night of such darkness not only love but hope see the light in His Light, for "he who followeth Me, walketh not in darkness."

Therefore Christ's Agony has a vital and personal value for every man born into the world and attacked by every species of moral and intellectual disorder. The tragedy of man's life, intellectual and moral, is deeply rooted in the crowning horror of all the horrors of history—the Death of Christ. In contemplating this noble Death we are not considering merely the Supreme Hero of history,

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but we are making a norm by which to measure both the injustice and confusion of the world and the deaths of all heroes that have died for a holy cause. Doubtless when I behold the naked arms of St. Stephen outstretched to the open heavens and the flying shower of stones beating his trembling body to the ground, I am touched with reverence and compassion. The effect is exciting and inspiring, but not personal to me as are the outstretched arms of the Lord Jesus on the arms of the Cross: "All day long have I stretched forth Mine arms to a foolish and a gainsaying people."

I kneel as a pilgrim on the bloody stones of Canterbury Cathedral, where St. Thomas à Becket gave his life not only for England, but for the Universal Church. I am stirred and I kiss the spot where his feet have trod, but his death is only remotely of service to me, whereas the Death of Christ is my very life. The tragedy of Cæsar's treacherous death at the foot of Pompey's statue is stirring, but the tragedy of Jesus Christ is the tragedy of *my* life. He Who was crucified on Calvary, is forever sacrificed on the Golgotha of men's souls: "They have dug My hands and feet; they have numbered all My bones."

One may kiss the Image on His crucifix for ten or even twenty years, and yet the Crucified may not speak. Let us hold it once again before our eyes and hearken. Perhaps He will speak to you—perhaps to me! The Voice of the Redeemer is ever speaking, but alas! where is there one who will hearken? We must be silent and listen. A man makes himself within himself, not without himself. We must be honest, plain, genuine, true and even brutal with ourselves when under the shadow of the Cross. To meditate on the Three Holy Hours of Christ's Agony we must exclude the noise of the busy world from our minds; all undue intensity must be relaxed, and hushed all the strife of tongues: "Behold I will lead her into the wilderness and there I will speak to her heart." In this intimacy we shall discover a bewildering wealth of gifts, for Our Divine Lord is a King with the badge of royalty on His Sacred Heart. He is the Eternal Priest, the Victim to be destroyed and consumed by sin.

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He is our Elder Brother with all human tenderness, the one Mediator between God and men, the Man, Christ Jesus.

When dying seven sentences broke from His pallid lips. Each word of each sentence has ten thousand lessons for you and for me. Each Word will tell its own story, in its own language to you and to me. What is it?

The First Word

“And when they were come to the place which is called Calvary, they crucified Him there; and the robbers, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. And Jesus said: *‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’*”—(Luke xxiii. 33, 34.)

SOME scholars familiar with the genius of the Hebrew language think that these words were expressed in such wise as to mean in the English translation: “He kept on repeating: ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’” Whether or not it be a literal rendition of the text, it is indeed true that these same words have been repeated, and repeated by Our Saviour ever since the first Good Friday. They have echoed across our unhappy world down through time, else destruction would long since have overtaken us.

Christ has dragged His emaciated and exhausted body with the heavy Cross on His Shoulders up to the Hill of the Skulls. It is a bleak spot surrounded by bare, sharp rocks. It overlooks Jerusalem. A curious tradition tells that Adam was buried upon the brow of it. Here Jesus Christ now stands with His Face toward the Holy City. He is looking at it; through the mist of His tears, He must once again have thought: “If thou didst but know, in this thy day, the things that are for thy peace, but now they are hidden from thine eyes.”

Jesus is shamelessly stripped of His raiment, piece by piece. His fair Body trembles as it shook in Gethsemane when He felt the chill of the Passion creep over His Soul. He is laid on His Cross which He has carried from the Prætorium. Then He is lifted up that He may draw all men unto Himself.

His outlook is upon the whole world which He beholds with one glance. His fixed gaze sweeps the whole duration of time. He sees all things, the present, the past and the future as present, since His Mind is the historic expression of the Divine Mind. All men pass before Him, civilization after civilization, the rise and the ruins of governments, the struggles and failures and the blasted hopes of all mankind.

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It is meet that a cry of mercy for us should issue from His lips. St. Teresa's favorite text was: "I will sing forever of the mercy of the Lord." From the fountain of pardon which Jesus opened upon Calvary all the resources for man's hopefulness and final salvation are consistently derived. His cry to the Father that we might be forgiven was not strained, it was sincere and profound. Behind all our badness the Eternal Father saw Christ's goodness. Behind the justice of the Eternal Father, there was Christ's mercy. The reckless behavior of the rabble at that moment before Christ, represented the fleeting and fickle sentiment of the whole world. His prayer to the Father for mercy, is His Eternal prayer for forgiveness for all the sins of history, past, present and future. His Words have made it possible for Infinite and Divine Charity to act consistently and to bring together mercy and justice in the same embrace. This gives us heart of hope when facing the mistakes of our own lives and the apparently insoluble difficulties in the present state of the world. We presume upon nothing, yet we are confident of everything when considering this utterance of Christ from the Cross. His Atonement and Propitiation have harmonized the two principles of Divine Justice and Mercy. Our forgiveness is wrought through Christ's forgiveness. He has bestowed upon us the highest degree of confidence at the moment when we are encompassed with the lowest degree of humility. His cry of forgiveness for the supreme folly of the world, is the crowning climax of Everlasting Mercy. The very mercilessness of the mob on Calvary, has perfected the most eloquent exposition of the boundlessness of God's mercy toward man.

We shall never know the full extent of the horror of the Passion because we can never perceive the area and depth and the far-reaching moral deterioration wrought by the malignity of sin. Hence we shall never fully understand the supreme climax of all mercies—the Divine Mercy. Yet we know we have sinned and we know the thousands of opportunities for good we have refused. Had we not refused, what would have been the result?

The Second Word

“And one of those robbers who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying: ‘If Thou be Christ, save Thyself and us.’ But the other answering, rebuked him, saying: ‘Neither dost thou fear God, seeing thou art under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man hath done no evil.’ And he said to Jesus: ‘Lord, remember me when Thou shalt come into Thy kingdom.’ And Jesus said to him: ‘*Amen I say to thee: this day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise.*’”—(Luke xxiii. 39-43.)

AT first the thieves crucified on either side of the Master were stupefied by the potion they had imbibed. It was a mock tradition of Roman penal procedure to dull the consciousness of the suffering criminal. In feebleness and desperation the thieves drank the potion. Jesus did not. The effect of the drink passed, at least from the penitent thief. The howls and the blasphemies of the mob died away. The moans and gasps of the two malefactors changed to the dread silence which usually precedes death. In this broken mood of utter exhaustion God’s grace is subtly, mysteriously working in the heart of one of the thieves. He is not dead, but he has relapsed into silence. There is meditation in his silence, for his darkened mind is breaking open to that Truth, which the intelligence of the whole world had overlooked. Its first acknowledgment is from the abandoned criminal on Golgotha. That spark of faith hidden in a mass of ignorance and vice, has waxed strong and illumined the weakness of poor human nature with flashes of glory. The thief when all, even the faithful, were tempted to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was dead and done for, proclaimed his vivid faith in the Resurrection: “Lord, remember me when Thou shalt come into Thy kingdom!”

We now gather from the screams and curses of the other thief that the stimulation and relief from the liquid drug administered by the executioner, is passing away; he is absorbed and writhing in his agony. He is in revolt at the relentless fury of his torture. Alas! poor wretch, he does not see the Magnificent Sufferer by his side; least of all does he see the composed and sanctified pain of his brother in crime.

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The good thief beheld with his blood-shot and blinded eyes, through the veil of his surging tears, that Another suffered beside himself. Through the lowering darkness in the skies and the clouds of dust provoked by the hoofs of the horses and the tumult of the crowd, he perceives the Hero Who has touched the acme of all suffering and gathered every note of melancholy within the inner folds of His Heart. But mark, he had to turn and look before he could discover that it is Jesus Who really suffers. It is His suffering which is ultimately behind our suffering.

The good thief forgot, for the moment, his suffering at the sight of Christ's suffering. He forgot for the moment, self. When self goes out, Jesus Christ comes in. Grace begins its work of transfiguration when self is subordinated. The transformation of self brought to the pale and trembling lips of the thief the faint and muffled but sincere prayer: "Lord, remember me when Thou shalt come into Thy kingdom."

It behooves us, then, to subdue self. It is not a facile warfare, for all the powers of nature and the principalities of evil will rebel and fight. Strange, bewildering paradox! that unless a man loseth his life, he shall not find it; that, not until man parts with his life, can he possess it for eternity. The mighty must be brought low that their lowliness may be regarded and exalted. The seed must fall into the ground and die, before it can bear fruit. It is the law of all spiritual life and progress. It is the process of gestation: first, dissolution to effect production, generation and new birth: "For unless a man be born again he shall not enter into life." We shall attempt, then, through our future career, to slough off self and totally and unreservedly surrender ourselves to the Divine Will. We shall open out every faculty of our being, mind, heart and will, to the Holy Spirit's influence as the vine-leaf to the drops of the dew. The process must begin with the crucifixion and the death of self. This is not the annihilation of self as in Buddhism, for in authentic Christianity, the personal and the individual self is always retained, but the spring of its operation is rooted in the Divine Will, to gain a holy rest and peace at the last.

The Third Word

"Now there stood by the Cross of Jesus His Mother and His Mother's sister, Mary of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalen. When Jesus, therefore, had seen His Mother and the disciple standing whom He loved, He saith to His Mother: '*Woman, behold thy son.*' After that He saith to the disciple: '*Behold thy Mother.*'"—(John xix. 25-27.)

THE Mother of Jesus emerged from a garden near the highroad and made her way to the foot of His Cross. The dark clouds were growing blacker. But through the gloom Jesus recognized His Mother at once and the virgin disciple whom He loved. "Woman," He said, "behold thy son!" Since His Hands were nailed to the limbs of the wooden Cross, He could not indicate with a gesture, to whom, precisely, He was pointing. So He was forced to turn His drooping Head and Eyes toward John and exclaim: "Behold thy Mother!"

Our dear Victim has been hanging for about an hour on the infamous gibbet. At its base stand two supreme personages—two preëminent types of transfigured love. When Our Lady looked up at the bruised and emaciated Body of her Son, she shook with horror. Every particle of that fair Body (blood, bone, muscle, tissue, sinew, all) was part of her body, since according to Faith, Christ had no natural father. We see at once, how close she has brought Our Saviour and bound Him to us with the cords of Adam. The covenant is, indeed, in the flesh. Small wonder then that Our Lord should call upon redeemed humanity to look to His Mother. Through His beaten and broken flesh, our flesh, which is the instrument of humiliation, has become the condition of our sanctification and rehabilitation into the new life of grace. Furthermore, the Blessed Mary loved her Son humanly and with all the strength of the maternal instinct. Yet He Whom she loved was Divine. So that human and divine love meet in *the* Woman. The term and object of her love were Divine, but the instrument and performance were human. It is a new revelation of love. Christ, the Mediator, would have us behold this vision of moral beauty by directing our thought to the mediatrix: "Son, behold thy mother!"

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In the economy of the Incarnation we have been redeemed through the flesh. St. John, the Beloved, typifies virginity—a virtue so irresistible in its charm that even the moral excesses of pagan civilizations could not withstand it. Inviolable chastity can only thrive under the sheltering wings of the Cross. Its gentle patroness is the Ever-Blessed Virgin: “Woman, behold thy son!” This glorious handmaiden, the personal fulfillment of prophecy, from Isaias to the Apocalypse, has combined the virginal and the maternal estate in their essential unity and perfection. She is not only the symbol of the comeliest love, but she is its sublimation. She went from virginity to maternity as from innocence unto innocence. She missed the imperfections of both estates. From serene waters to the more turbulent, she moved with the soft dignity of the swan. The placid heart of the virgin within its zone was encompassed by the fervid heart of the matron.

The disciple whom Jesus loved, deemed it prudent to lead Mary to his own home. Around these two are gathered the high and serviceable friendships and loves of all times. “Blessed is the man who has found a true friend,” says the author of *The Imitation*. “Son, behold thy mother.” Fine love is perfected in restraint, transfigured in its sorrows and crowned in death. Only the virginal ardor of John could have provoked him to lay his head upon the breast of Jesus. The intimacy is unspeakable in its beauty and ingenuousness. When our loves and friendships are safeguarded by Jesus, then we are morally secure. When our loves and friendships are united with Christ, the Source, principle and expression of God’s love for man, then they take on a perfection and merit, which of themselves they could never possess. “The final perfection of everything whatsoever,” says St. Thomas Aquinas, “lies in the attainment of its end. The ultimate perfection to which anything can attain is this, that it be united with its principle.” The concluding words of Dante’s poem express the same thought: “It is love that moves the sun in heaven and all the stars.”

The Fourth Word

"Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over the whole earth, until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying: 'Eli, Eli, lamma sabachthani?' that is: 'My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?'"—(Matt. xxvii. 45, 46.)

OUR strong Son of God has gone down into the deepest depths of obscurity and desolation. His cry which pierces the very walls of heaven is shrouded with inscrutable darkness. It is one of the most difficult passages in Holy Scripture, not merely to the scholar for its philological significance, but to the saint and mystic who have struggled to break through and discern its inner meaning.

But speculation is futile, unless we go up to the hill of Calvary and kneel at the foot of the Cross. Everything is reduced to prayer. We are so helpless in all things. How little can we know of the simple and profound essence of the Divine Nature. That Jesus should voluntarily drop a veil over His own Eyes, so that His Eternal Father should deliberately withdraw His Presence from Christ's sight is no less a mystery than that this illimitable transcendental Being Whom we call God should suffer as Christ in the form of Human Flesh and Blood—*Manet immota Fides*.

This is indeed a gigantic wonder, but not a miracle, for a miracle would suppose the suspension of a law. How in this case, at least, can we say a law has been suspended since we know little or nothing of the laws of the Divine Being and more especially when the Divinity utters a cry which echoes the abject helplessness of all humanity? Ancient and modern philosophy are ever proving how increasingly complex and mysterious is man's nature. Infinitely more so is Christ's. In confusion of thought we are sometimes bewildered at what seems to be an alternating personality and a disincarnate spirit in man. Why then should we marvel at the bewildering Personality of Christ?

"My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

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An infidel commentator, now somewhat discredited, saw in these words of Jesus an evidence of momentary moral weakness. It was his opinion (which he seemed to retract more than once) that as the cloud hid Jesus from the Face of His Father He bore an agony of despair more acute a thousand times than all His torments, and that He perhaps repented His suffering for a vile race.

Such a belief quenches at once the serene fire and glory of the Atonement and Intercession. It finds a flaw in the stupendous structure of the Redemption, which would let it crumble to earth. It detects a vein of clay in the statue not of a Greek god, but of a God Whose failure would shatter the hopes of man—a God Who would thus become a mockery to man's heart and a libel to man's insatiable love. The darkness of night which has now fallen on Golgotha, would then envelop forever the tumultuous problem of life and the inner folds of man's spirit.

Be it said however of the honesty of this same infidel that he pictures Jesus in His fit of dereliction as being sustained once again by heavenly strength and by the Divine Light which for the moment seemed to be flickering out of His Soul.

But is not that the approved and traditional teaching? Was it not in the visions of the seers and the reproaches of the prophets that a sea of desolation would overwhelm for an instant the serene spirit of our dear Redeemer? These prophetic cries concerning the Messiah are expressed in such words as these:

“Save Me, O God: for the waters are come in even unto My Soul.” “All Thy waves and storms are gone over Me.” “Thou hast laid Me in the lowest pit, in a place of darkness and in the deep.”

The hidden meaning of the prophets is revealed to us by the sublime message of the Prophet: “He hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”

It is not irreverent to say that the same God Who laid the Cross of life upon the shoulders of suffering humanity could out of love for us suffer solitary distress and in a preëminent degree. The calm impassable Divine Nature would not be disturbed if Divinity should assume the sus-

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ceptibilities for unfathomable woe in the being of man. It is terrible and inexplicable, but it is not impossible or incredible.

We shall learn more of this mystery only when we put our fingers to our lips, bow our heads and kneel within the shadow of the Cross until the fretful storm overhanging Calvary passes by.

Difficulties are difficulties, but they are not doubts. No finite mind can even remotely follow into the deep recesses of the Infinite Mind and Will. We cannot predicate except in the terms of human expression what happened to the Divine and Human Nature of Christ when He beheld the undrawn veil which shut out from Him temporarily the Face of God. This overwhelming human disappointment of Christ rivets the wondering sympathy and opens a ceaseless stream of tears for deathless ages. This manifestation of the Human in the High Priest of the Eternal Sacrifice makes the Mediatorship between God and Man totally complete.

Beside being the Eternal Priest, Christ was a King with prophetic office. His badge of royalty He carried upon His wounded Breast. So with the regal step of a King He marched to the borderland of a domain beyond which our limited human ken could not reach. When He uttered the wail: "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me," He entered a land unknown to us. If it be true that the higher a nature is, the more manifold and simple it is—if that deep law (which runs through all life) makes manifest that the profound natures have at the same time a unity and complexity, then this same law is applicable to the highest of all natures—The Divine. Dante sings that as his sight became purified he entered more and more into the rays "of the High Light which of itself is True."

Language is faint and inadequate to express the transcendent glory of the Divine Being. To assert this does not signify skepticism, but a state of mind which humbly and prayerfully acknowledges its limitations.

All we know of Christ's Passion is enough for us to know. It is enough for us to know that He gives us a

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proof of His Love which alone makes tolerable this pitiful life of ours. It is enough for us to know in the expression of St. Paul that He chose to "taste death for us all" and to learn "obedience by the things which He suffered."

"He mourned," says Arnaud de Chartres, "that the fruit of His struggles should be torn from Him; He cried aloud that His sweat, His toils and His Death were thus bereft of their reward; since those for whom He had suffered so much were abandoned to everlasting perdition." This wrung from Him that mournful cry.

The blood-red sun hanging in the sky over Calvary was a faint shadow of the light which if not withdrawn was certainly darkened to the ever-alert vision of Jesus. In this darkness we hear His groan from the Cross. Blinded with our tears and overcome with pity, we struggle to find His pallid and emaciated Face. To lose God even for a moment is the death of deaths. Jesus in this hour has gone down into the deepest depth. He has lost the Beatific Vision. In this sad plight all comfort has gone, human and Divine. "I looked for one that would grieve together with Me, but there was none: for one that would comfort Me, and I found none."

The apparent replacement of the human for the Divine—and the Divine for the human—in the Person of our dear Lord is confusing to us because our minds are too small to fathom the abysmal deeps of His Life and Love or the terrible far-reaching malignity of sin, for which He is making Atonement. We can but hold our breath and bow our heads at this Ineffable Love. It is the most romantic tragedy that has existed since the beginning of history. Our difficulty is in trying to contemplate how any being could be sustained without the constant and all-pervading support of the Creator. We know that it is in God we have our being, and if He seems to withdraw from us, it is only a subjective or seeming abandonment. This tortuous and loud moan of our Strong Lover from the Cross proves that at the critical moment when we think ourselves utterly forsaken of God, then we are nearest to the inner folds of the Divine Heart. In this crisis it is futile

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to turn to creatures. They are helpless. God will eventually assert Himself. The victory and merit is in holding fast to Him even in bitter desolation: "Though Thou slayest me yet will I trust in Thee."

"And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying: '*Eli, Eli, lamma sabacthani?*' that is to say: 'My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?'"

He Who was dying that others might live—He Who was agonizing to wash man's sin away—He is overlooked by God. We cannot believe it. This was what the Sufferer seemed to think for the moment. He appears to be defeated by the principalities of darkness. But in the failure He manifests the triumphant glory of the Father.

We cannot conjecture further. The universal miasma of sin which overshadows and oppresses the earth drops a mighty veil between man and the Face of God. It is that overpowering Stygian blackness which makes our eyes so blind when looking into the inner and essential recesses of being where lurks the secret of the mystery of moral evil.

Meanwhile we throw ourselves upon our knees and humbly and sincerely pray for the light of Faith in our hours of obscurity and desolation.

Dante in his vision of the *Paradiso* sings:

"Because into the Faith which maketh souls
Known of God, 'twas there I entered."

When St. John led our Blessed Lady away from the Cross the last bond that held Him to our earthly life was utterly broken—but when God apparently broke from Him, then All was gone—human and Divine. With the Lord Christ (as with us at death) human solace had failed. We are alone in death. Human affection may come down with us to the very edge of the mists and boding shadows of the valley of death. But we go down into the black night at last, alone.

O Blessed Lord! Thou Who hast tasted this dread loneliness, be with us when the green scene of earth has gone dark in an instant, and the glisten of love has faded from the eyes that watched us to the end!

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While our Beloved Christ is hanging on the Cross, nature sympathizes with that cry which was never heard before or since on land or sea. The dimming of a mid-day light like a threatening shadow has enveloped that Hill which is called Calvary.

In the distance lies the Holy City. Its stone towers and bright domes are scarcely visible for the mantle of doom is quickly wrapping itself around it. It will soon pass from our sight and also the bleak hills beyond the Jordan. An awful pall will rest over the bosom of nature—at least for the Three Hours of Christ's Agony. It is the ardent sympathy of creation for the Creator.

The Cross, whereon the Christ hung in death, was hidden in a thick, black cloud; all human noises were hushed and died away, and the cry which antiquity has put into the mouth of Dionysius the Areopagite expresses that mighty fear which shook the souls of men:

"Either the Divinity suffers, or He is moved to pity at some great woe!" It is a tradition that when the blissful martyr St. Thomas à Becket was slaughtered in Canterbury Cathedral, there were sharp flashes of lightning and loud peals of thunder. The sullen skies of England bore protest to the bloody murder of the innocent Archbishop.

That dense impenetrable darkness enshrouding the spare Body of Jesus is related in other writings beside the Sacred Scriptures. Tertullian refers to the national archives in words such as these: "Examine your own annals, and there you will find that in the days of Pilate, when Christ suffered, the sun disappeared in full day and the mid-day light was interrupted." Phlegon of Tralles, a freedman of the Emperor Adrian, is quoted in the writings of Eusebius, how, in the fourth year of the two hundred and second Olympiad, there was a strange, unnatural phenomenon in the sky, when "it became night at noon-day."

In an ancient book of Meditations there are these quaint and stirring lines:

"Think then on the wonders that then befell; how creatures that had no wit sorrowed at His death. The

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sun withdrew his brightness and became all mirk, and thus shewed that it sorrowed for Christ's death; the hard rock was riven; the earth quaked; the graves opened, and the dead men that were in them rose to life and witnessed that He was very God that the Jews did to death, with sighings and tears."

This lament of our Sufferer which pierced the gloom was predicated of the Messiah in many places of the Psalms and other sacred texts. His mental Agony is depicted in language which should rend our hearts with horror and pity.

This lowermost depth of Christ's woe will at last bring about the conversion of the Gentiles. The sacred author speaks of it in this wise:

O God my God, look upon me: why hast Thou forsaken me?

Far from my salvation are the words of my sins.

O my God, I shall cry by day, and Thou wilt not hear: and by night, and it shall not be reputed as folly in me.

But Thou dwellest in the holy place, the praise of Israel.

In Thee have our fathers hoped: they have hoped, and Thou hast delivered them.

They cried to Thee, and they were saved: they trusted in Thee, and were not confounded.

But I am a worm, and no man: the reproach of men, and the outcast of the people.

All they that saw me have laughed me to scorn: they have spoken with the lips, and wagged the head.

He hoped in the Lord, let Him deliver him: let Him save him, seeing he delighteth in Him.

For Thou art He that hast drawn me out of the womb: my hope from the breasts of my mother. I was cast upon Thee from the womb.

From my mother's womb Thou art my God, depart not from me.

For tribulation is very near: for there is none to help me.

Many calves have surrounded me: fat bulls have besieged me.

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They have opened their mouths against me, as a lion ravening and roaring.

I am poured out like water; and all my bones are scattered.

My heart is become like wax melting in the midst of my bowels.

My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue hath cleaved to my jaws: and Thou hast brought me down into the dust of death.

For many dogs have encompassed me: the council of the malignant hath besieged me.

They have dug my hands and feet. They have numbered all my bones.

And they have looked and stared upon me. They parted my garments among them; and upon my vesture they cast lots.

But Thou, O Lord, remove not Thy help to a distance from me; look towards my defence.

Deliver, O God, my soul from the sword: my only one from the hand of the dog.

Save me from the lion's mouth; and my lowness from the horns of the unicorns.

I will declare Thy name to my brethren: in the midst of the church will I praise Thee.

Ye that fear the Lord, praise Him; all ye the seed of Jacob, glorify Him.

Let all the seed of Israel fear Him: because He hath not slighted nor despised the supplication of the poor man.

Neither hath He turned away His face from me: and when I cried to Him He heard me.

With Thee is my praise in a great church: I will pay my vows in the sight of them that fear Him.

The poor shall eat and shall be filled: and they shall praise the Lord that seek Him: their hearts shall live forever and ever.

All the ends of the earth shall remember, and shall be converted to the Lord:

And all the kindreds of the Gentiles shall adore in His sight.

For the kingdom is the Lord's; and He shall have dominion over the nations.

THE FOURTH WORD

All the fat ones of the earth have eaten and have adored: all they that go down to the earth shall fall before Him.

And to Him my soul shall live: and my seed shall serve Him.

There shall be declared to the Lord a generation to come: and the heaven shall shew forth His justice to a people that shall be born, which the Lord hath made.

In his commentary on this fourth of the last words of Our Saviour on the Cross, the Abbé Constant Fournard writes these illuminating and beautiful thoughts:

“My God! My God! dost Thou abandon Me?”

“But how can we make this moment of apparent despair to which Jesus yielded harmonize with the blessedness essential to His divine personality? Herein again there is involved an unfathomable mystery, the Mystery of the Incarnation. To comprehend how the Son of God could speak of Himself as forsaken by His Father, we should first need to explain how the Infinite Being could take upon Himself a finite nature; for between these two humiliations there is only a difference of degree—the abandonment of Jesus upon the Cross only continued what was first accomplished in the Incarnation, and in these two Mysteries the Godhead remains equally inviolable. With the Christ in His anguish it was even as with those mountain chains whose white crests pierce the clouds. Often the tempests do havoc with their rugged sides, strewing them with the wreckage of the storm; yet naught can trouble the snowy peaks, which, far, far above the whirlwind’s reach, stand evermore serene and crowned with light.

“In that same hour, the darkness disappearing, and with it the mists of fear, forthwith the Jews found courage to reëcho those words of Jesus—feigning to mistake the divine Name of *Eli* for that of the Prophet.

“‘He is calling upon Elias,’ they said.

“Yet even by this jibe they confessed to the throes of terror they had just felt; for all Israel knew that the awful Seer was to reappear upon a day of terror and blaz-

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ing fire, beneath cloud-hung skies and a moon like blood, when all the heavenly powers would tremble in their spheres."

Although we can never fathom the full significance of this dereliction of the Great Priest of our salvation, it is worth noting that some of the most innocent and choice spirits have borne the same species of suffering, but, of course, in an immeasurably fainter degree.

The Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, in his *Ascent to Mount Carmel*, tries to formulate some norm by which the highest contemplatives can measure their frightful desolation so that despair may not overtake them. As in Jesus, so in them, the superficial glance of the worldling would see despair. In any other than Jesus and His saints it could be despair, but we know that in them it is not.

God withdraws His light sometimes from His elect. There are times when the routine of religion is a weariness even to those who have left all for the sake of Christ—when even the daily Communions are harsh and dry and lacking in sensible sweetness—and even when the desire of the heart is to swoon away with delight for very love of Jesus. So we sometimes have saints plunged by God into what is called the obscure night of the soul.

In token of Christ's Three Hours' Agony these sacrificial souls have their three periods of terrible desolation. Their terror passes from depth to depth, until purified they begin to see more clearly the reason for their trial, which is, that, they may be more closely knit in harmony with the Divine Will.

Another lesson of solace is to be learned when we remember that our Redeemer had in His Mind and Heart all the mental mishaps of our distracted humanity. He beheld in vision on the Cross that wild and disheveled army of creatures with broken minds who either under the malign control of Satan or because of impaired cerebral tissue imagine themselves to be forever utterly forsaken by God. Religious melancholy has not even the assurance of the heavenly homesickness of the saints. It is black despair and the religiously insane have lost the will

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power to shake off its mental control. Victimized by we know not what, they imagine that their sins will never be forgiven by God even when it is known that sins red as scarlet and more numerous than the sands on the sea-shore are washed away like snow in the face of the torrent. It is the perpetual cry of St. Paul that Our Blessed Lord took upon Himself all, *all* our misfortunes, and yet while He did, He never lost balance in mind, heart or will. He mentally suffered without losing His own mental composure, all those cruel subjective memories which overpower the innocently insane.

If the Blood-sweat in Gethsemane bore testimony to poignant agony, its horror is now more acute, for He has gathered up, in the suffering of His Mind, all the mental sufferings of the world. Therefore the superstition that insanity meant the ineradicable and ultimate curse of God upon the victim and his family, is superstition of the most ignorant kind. Out of love for Him we kiss our crucifix and more tenderly His thorn-crowned Forehead, wherein lodges the structure of His suffering Brain. According to St. Paul in his Epistle to the Galatians, Christ suffered as no human can tell. He saw hell as the home of never-ending despair—a cavern more terrible than Dante ever pictured. The Apostle's words concerning Jesus are "having become sin for our sake," He was made "a curse and an execration."

"Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law being made a curse for us: for it is written: Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree. That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Christ Jesus: that we may receive the promise of the Spirit by faith."

The Fifth Word

“Afterwards Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said: ‘*I thirst.*’”—(John xix. 28.)

WE are told that in His desolation Jesus gave a loud cry, but now His Voice seems to be weak and languid. Naturally so. He has lost a great quantity of Blood in the sweat at Gethsemane, at the scourging and in the courtyard when the soldiers pressed deep the thorns on His bleeding Head. Medical experience assures us that the agony of thirst from a parched body is so terrible as to sometimes take away reason, especially in cases of drowning. “My strength is dried up like a potsherd: and My tongue hath cleaved to my jaws: and thou hast brought Me down unto the dust of death.”

It is the traditional interpretation of the Fathers, and especially of St. Augustine and St. Bernard, that this thirst of Christ represented the mighty fire of His Love for us. It is a small word even in the Hebrew, but He has uttered it and the force of its meaning must be tremendous. Of course, He is suffering for every gluttonous excess of all the luxurious civilizations. He had in mind our intemperance and the sins of every drunkard that will reel in the streets of our city tonight. But the larger commentary would be that of St. Gregory Nazianzen that “God is thirsting to be thirsted for and desires to be desired and loves to be loved.”

We know but little of the nature of the Divine Being, but this much is obvious, that there is something analogous to passion in the great Heart of God. Much as we may love Him, He loves us infinitely more. Such, too, is the infinite activity of the Divine Mind and the boundless receptivity of the spirit of man, that the desire of God for man and man for God is profound and constant. Hence the seething restlessness of man for God—even when he does not know it. Herein lies the source of his melancholy—the whole world cannot fill. God alone can fill it. He is choly and discontent. There is a want in the heart which

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our first beginning and our last end. We try to slake the heart's thirst with the water that will never quench the burning fever of life. Christ's thirst is deeper than the mere chemical reaction on the dry tongue in His Mouth. It is more keen than the long fast in the wilderness. "My soul hath thirsted for the Strong, the Living God."

There was a Levite living in exile in the Hermoniim, a range of mountains, which ran east of the upper Jordan. One day he spied a young deer clambering up the side of the mountains in search of pools of water left by the winter torrents. He is reminded of his own unappeased longing for Him Who alone can satisfy the heart's thirst. He exclaims: "As the hart panteth after the fountains of water, so my soul panteth after Thee O God!" David's prayer, under the pressure of a furious battle, is: "Oh! that some man would give me to drink of the water out of the cistern that is in Bethlehem." If prayer be an interchange of confidences between God and man, as it should be, then the prayers of King David and the Levite poet are stirring and sincere.

It is this desire for God and the pain of loss which constitute hell for all the damned souls: "They have forsaken Me, the Fountain of Living Water, and have digged to themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water." We read that when the Apostles went into the city of Sichar to buy meat, Our Lord did not go with them. It was the sixth hour and He was weary. He sat down by Jacob's well. A Samaritan woman came to draw water. The Stranger asked that He might drink and spoke of a living fountain. The woman knew of no such water. The well before her was about ninety feet deep, and there was a tradition among the peasantry that Abraham and Isaac and Jacob had drunk of it and watered there their camels and sheep. Intuition or grace or something impelled her to divine some unusual quality in the Stranger. The stone pot was now lifted out of the well, when she questioned Him: "Art Thou greater than our Father Abraham?" With solemn self-assertiveness (an indication of His Divinity), He exclaimed: "Amen, Amen I say to you, if any man drink of the water that I

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shall give him, he shall not thirst forever, for the water that I shall give him, shall become in him a fountain of water springing up into life everlasting." This is the only water which will gratify the heart hunger and quench the thirst of man's profound being. An old spiritual author, quoted by Lallement, avers that to try to slake man's thirst with the finite, is, "as if one should take a handful of water, and try to refill the empty bed of the ocean."

The Sixth Word

"Now there was a vessel set there full of vinegar. And they, putting a sponge full of vinegar about hyssop, put it to His Mouth. Jesus therefore, when He had taken the vinegar, said: '*It is consummated.*'"—(John xix. 29, 30.)

THE Three Hours of Agony draw on apace and the work of mediation is now perfected. Christ's worn face, of a thousand battles, lights up a little with ineffable bliss. His tones bespeak a pæan of victory: "It is consummated." It is finished. What is finished? What is consummated? He Who has passed in some superhuman manner through the grim obscurity of pessimism, has a peal of ultimate triumph even in His dying Voice.

What is consummated? The greatest work of all. Greater than the act of Divine design which builded the immense architecture of the heavens and gilded with light hundreds of millions of central suns and visible stars. It is an act greater than that which flung these flaming spheres into space and directs the courses of planets, worlds, universes, systems and combinations of systems, the vastness of which no stretch of fancy can comprehend. We are overwhelmed with the mystery of the Divine Energy behind the music in the leaping of the waters from the solid rock, in the strength of the tornado and the rain storm and the gentle motion of the zephyr and the softly falling dew.

But there is no comparative relationship between these glories and the priceless moral worth of one immortal soul. The world might shrivel up like a scroll, but the soul of man lives on forever. Its value is unspeakable. It was for the salvation of man's soul that the Veil of the Temple was rent and the sun was wiped out of heaven and the earth trembled and God was forsaken of God. It was for the restoration of man's soul that Jesus Christ wrought and finally consummated the work of Atonement, Propitiation and Redemption. In the garden Satan tempted man. Whatever may have been the nature of that primeval revolt, it is evident that man's whole being was put awry

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and out of joint with the Divine purpose for which he was created. Christ's work was consummated that man might be born again and his faculties divinely directed.

We speak in dogmatic parlance of man's Fall, but this is a feeble word for so radical and far-reaching a misfortune. Even those who belittle dogma, cannot but perceive the reality of moral evil. As in a garden Lucifer triumphed, so in a garden God was tempted by God that the principalities of evil might not possess man's soul. This struggle still wages fiercely, but Christ has bent man's undisciplined will toward God, and if man but wish it, he shall move harmoniously and finally in God forever. This is the state of beatitude, taught by the Fathers, the saints and the spiritual masters and majestically exploited in Dante's *Paradiso* as the crowning glory of man. The total possession of one human soul is of more concern to the Lord Jesus than all the stupendous fabric and superlative grandeur of nature. It is more precious than all the kingdoms, oligarchies, republics and civilizations of the world. There is no comparison between spirit and matter. No wonder Our Saviour consummated His work for the moral security of man with such majesty and perfection: "It is consummated."

"And I will pour out upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace, and of prayers: and they shall look upon Me Whom they have pierced; and they shall mourn for Him as one mourneth for an only son; and they shall grieve over Him, as the manner is to grieve for the death of the first born. . . . And they shall say to Him: *'What are these wounds in the midst of Thy hands?'* And He shall say: *'With these I was wounded in the house of them that loved Me.'*"—(Zach. xii. 10; xiii. 6.)

The Seventh Word

“And it was almost the sixth hour; and there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the Temple was rent in the midst; and Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said: *‘Father, into Thy hands I commend My Spirit.’*”—(Luke xxlii. 44-46.)

THE frail and spent limbs of our Mighty King and Priest are cold and relaxing. In spite of His thorny Crown His rich, lustrous hair is disheveled and falls to one side over His Face. His Lips are dry and drooping. His Head is bowed down in death, as St. Augustine naïvely remarks, “to give His parting Kiss to His beloved ones.” It is impossible to describe the species of sound, made by the long-drawn breath and the short gasps of a dying man. It may last for three hours or more. Silent friends keep vigil, to watch and pray until the terrible struggle is over. Then one more quick-witted and courageous than the others, whispers: “He is dead.” That shall be said of us. Someone will draw the curtain, come out, and in a hushed voice, say: “He is dead.”

“Father, into Thy Hands I commend my spirit.” May our last words be these when the scene before us shall go on the instant blind and all the world is receding from our vision. Every Hebrew child knew these last words of Jesus. As a child He probably lisped them every night and morning at Mary’s knee. He has uttered them for the last time—Jesus Christ is dead.

I take my last look at Jesus. I have learned to die to all, since I cannot forget that He has died for me. “Forget not the kindness of thy Surety, for He hath given His Life for thee.”

I take my last look at Jesus and I know He is at rest. O Jesus, may our souls, and the souls of those who have gone before us with the sign of Faith, rest in Thee forever and ever. Amen.

Conclusion

“He humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the Cross. For which cause God also hath exalted Him, and hath given Him a Name which is above all names: that in the Name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those that are in heaven, on earth, and under the earth: and that every tongue should confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father.”—(Philip. ii. 8-11.)

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