

THE SEVEN LAST WORDS OF CHRIST

Saint Bonaventure and Arnold of Bonneval

Translated by Fr. Robert Nixon, OSB

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*“When you shall have lifted up the Son of man, then shall
you know, that I am he.”*

—John 8:28

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THE FIRST WORD

“PATER, IGNOSCE ILLIS, QUIA
NESCIUNT QUID FACIUNT.”¹⁶

“And when they had 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 23:33–34

Saint Bonaventure’s Meditation on the First Word¹⁷

There are “Seven Words” (or pronouncements) which Christ uttered while elevated upon the cross, which may be likened to seven rich and verdant leaves springing forth upon a mystical vine [the cross itself being this spiritual vine]. Again, the wood of the cross may be likened to the frame of a lyre, and these Seven Words imagined to be the seven strings extended upon it.

¹⁶ “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

¹⁷ From Bonaventure’s *Vitis Mystica*.

The first words of the crucified Jesus were when He said: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” O leaf, wonderfully green and vibrant! How marvelously these words of mercy befit the incarnate Word of the eternal Father! For the good Master here does exactly what He taught. He prays not only for His friends and supporters, but for His enemies and for those who persecute and torment Him.

O reader, treasure this precious leaf zealously within the depths of your heart! Then, whenever you are afflicted by any enemy, you will be able to summon to your mind the memory of the abundant sweetness of the supremely merciful Jesus. You will be able to use this saying as a powerful shield against any insults which may be directed against you, and any aspersions cast upon you. The divine Spouse prayed for those who killed Him: will *you* not pray for those who insult and criticize you?

Let us examine this prayer of Christ more diligently. “Father,” He says. Why does He place the name “Father” here? Children typically use the word “Father” when asking for some affectionate favor, because by doing so they bring to mind the natural bond of paternal love which unites them with their parent. Thus Jesus, the compassionate and merciful Lord, although He knew that His voice was always heard by the Father, chooses to use this intimate form of address here, in order to make manifest to us how much

sincerity and love we should feel in praying for our enemies. It is as if He says, "Father, through the paternal and filial love by which we are eternally one, I pray for these, my killers. Remember Your love for Me, and forget the sins of my foes!"



Jesus, saving victim;
Jesus, atoning sacrifice;
Jesus, safe refuge for the anguished and afflicted!
For the sake of the human race, You have redeemed
the captive;
You have led us forth from the sorrows of our
earthly exile;
You have taken our guilt upon Your own sacred
shoulders!
And not only this, but You have united us to God
Himself
In an eternal and indissoluble union.
The chains You did not refuse, nor the scourges, nor
the blows.
You did not flee from the gallows of the malefactor,
Nor did You seek to escape receiving the holy
wounds
By which our wounds are healed.

When You were held to the cross,
And the enemy snarled savagely against You,
When the hammer struck, and the nail pierced Your
holy flesh,
When pain and anguish overwhelmed You,
Then You implored the Father with suppliant
prayer,
That He should forgive even those who crucified
You, saying:
“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they
do.”¹⁸

Arnold's Commentary on the First Word¹⁹

After Christ's teaching and preaching of the doctrine of the Gospel, and after all of His marvelous signs and miracles, He chose to reinforce what He had taught by means of His own personal example. This was pursuant to the wise proverb of the Roman philosopher Seneca: “The journey to knowledge is long and difficult through instruction alone,

¹⁸ From Bonaventure's *De Septem Verbis Domini in Cruce*.

¹⁹ From Arnold of Bonneval's *Tractatus de Septem Verbis Domini in Cruce*. It is to be noted that, since Arnold used a slightly different ordering of the Seven Last Words to Bonaventure, some editorial rearrangement of his commentaries have been made to accord with what is now the standard ordering.

but easy and direct by means of example.”²⁰ And, lest there should have been anything omitted or unclear in His teachings, Our Lord completed it and perfectly illustrated His message by the lesson of His own actions.

Thus what He reserved until the very end of His earthly life constitutes a summary and consummation of all that He had done and said previously. Christ’s final words are therefore a most precious inheritance, bequeathed to the faithful. As such, they should be embraced with ardent love, and reflected upon with the deepest devotion. It may be said that Our Lord wrote His last words in His own blood, intending thereby to inscribe them indelibly into the hearts of all those who believe in Him and love Him.

So it was that from the pulpit of the cross, He communicated His new law, recapitulating briefly but comprehensively and completely all that He had hitherto said. He, the good Master, taught simultaneously by word and by action, by precept and by example. He was not merely a teacher of the truth, but a witness to it, and, indeed, the very Incarnation of it.

It was upon the cross that He chose to speak these infinitely profound words, just as, a little earlier, He had chosen to keep silence before Herod and Pilate, spurning their impertinent and impious curiosity. From the gallows of the cross, He addresses not the potentates of this world, but

²⁰ See Seneca, *Moral Epistle VI*.

the poor and humble in spirit. And the torments which He sustained were not able to impair or compromise the purity and nobility of His lessons.

In these Seven Last Words, Christ laid down a firm foundation for the edifice of the faith, including all its mystical paradoxes. Therefore, His words sometimes exhibited His humanity, and at other times manifested His divinity. Sometimes He spoke as the omnipotent Lord of the universe, and at other times He spoke as a fragile mortal. The most exalted sublimity and the most abject humility thus alternate. At one moment He implores, and at another He commands. He laments the human experience of abandonment by God, and yet also promises the glories of paradise to the thief who suffers beside Him. He does not complain on His own behalf, nor does He curse and condemn His killers. Rather, in His very first words, He implores mercy for them, and manifests the infinite depths of the divine mercy.



“An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth!”²¹ Thus was it decreed by the old law in former times. And in this ancient law, Moses spared no one. All injuries were to be punished and avenged, in a most exact and proportionate manner, with neither mercy nor compromise nor partiality. And

²¹ Exodus 21:24.

whoever disdained or violated the grim demands of this exacting law were to be put to death.

Yet, with the advent of the time of grace, the stringency of that old decree is tempered.²² Evangelical mildness expels from the elect all wrath and vengefulness. A person is no longer permitted to call his brother or sister a rebel or a fool, nor does the teaching of our Master permit a hurtful word to be uttered in rage.²³

For He who is the supreme judge of all is Himself the only avenger and punisher. And Christ directs us to return our swords to their sheathes; for the one who lives by the sword (as He teaches us) will surely die by the sword.²⁴ And this He exemplified perfectly in His passion. For when His back was pounded with blows, when His cheeks were torn, when His face was covered with contemptuous spittle, He did not strike back. When His head was made to bleed with the crown of thorns, when His hands and feet were pierced by nails, when His side was torn asunder with a spear, He remained imperturbably silent and supremely patient. Like an innocent lamb led to the slaughter, He offered His very flesh as a fragrant holocaust upon the altar of the cross—for the propitiation, not of any guilt of His own, but for our sins.

²² See Matthew 5:38–42.

²³ See Matthew 5:22.

²⁴ See Matthew 26:52.

our confusion is clarified;
our belligerence is pacified;
our darkness is illuminated;
our hardness is mollified;
and our sourness is rendered sweet.

Breadth

The *breadth* of the cross is such that it embraces the entire creation with the heavenly amplitude of its charity. By the all-encompassing and stupendous breath of the cross, God united Himself to the whole human race, without exception. He thus shares in all the multitude and diversity of sufferings which afflict the woebegone children of Eve and the wretched progeny of Adam, which we all are. He feels the discomforts of the sick, and the constraints of the captives, and the poverty of the poor, and the tears of the sorrowful, and the pain of the broken-hearted.

He extended His arms in love, as a hen extends its wings to gather and protect its chicks. And as a hen does not discriminate between one or the other of its offspring, but desires the safety and well-being of them all, so does Christ long for the salvation of all individuals. Thus it was appropriate that there was a thief both at the right and the left hand of the cross. Very gladly would Our Lord have

promised paradise to both—but, alas, only one was willing to accept this precious gift!

Height

Finally, we should consider the *height* of the cross. For its base was located on the earth, or rather beneath the earth, yet its peak reached upwards towards the sublimity of the heavens. This towering height of the cross reveals the strong confidence which is born of the virtue of hope. This confidence and hope raises up to aspirations of celestial glory all who have been crucified to this passing world.³⁸ And for those who have an unstained conscience and are free from attachments to earthly things, it makes them sharers, even during this life, in this heavenly beatitude.

Of such a soul, it may be said that:
already it tastes the sweetness of paradise;
already it converses with angels;
already it consorts with saints;
already it perceives the highest truths;
already it melts with bliss;
already it rejoices in jubilation;
already it rests in peace;
already it loves perfectly!

³⁸ See Galatians 6:14.

Yet what is it that can exalt a soul to such a mystical beatitude? It is not pride, nor learning, nor wisdom, nor even good works; but rather, it is the sublimity of the cross itself. And without the experience of the cross in some way or the other, no one may enter into such blessedness, or experience such divine elevation.

Saint Bonaventure's Prayer

O gentle patience, and patient gentleness,
O infinite mercy, O infinite kindness!
As a gentle Lamb, You proffer no complaint,
And as a loving mother, You seek to excuse the
 wrongs of Your children.
With Your most sweet soul, You offer only
 benevolence;
With Your most merciful will, You display only
 forgiveness.
Unto You, the hopes of my souls all fly;
Unto You, the sighs of my heart all ascend.
To You flow all my tears,
And the desperate yearnings of my heart's cry to
 You, O Jesus:
"Forgive me, Lord, forgive me,
For very I often I know not what I do!" Amen.³⁹

³⁹ From Bonaventure's *De Septem Verbis Domini in Cruce*.

Saint Bonaventure's Hymn

In the Lord's most holy cross,
Which restored sweet Eden's loss,
Bides a refuge ever sure,
Truest hope of hearts made pure!

Let us ever mindful be
Of Christ's doleful agony,
Of the crown of thorns He wore—
Torments which for us He bore,

And the wounds in limbs and side,
Pouring forth love's crimson tide;
Whips and gall and bitter wine
Proffered to those lips divine!

In such things, let hearts be sunk—
Lost, inebriated, drunk!
Let the cross's branch take root
In our souls, and bear rich fruit.

Let us honor fervently
That redeeming gallows tree,
And, amongst the saints, Christ's praise
Peal with joy for endless days!

Praise and glory to God's Son,
Scorned and sold, betrayed and shunned:
Thus died Christ to save the lost,
Paid in blood sin's dreadful cost!⁴⁰

⁴⁰ From Bonaventure's *Officium de Passione Domini*.