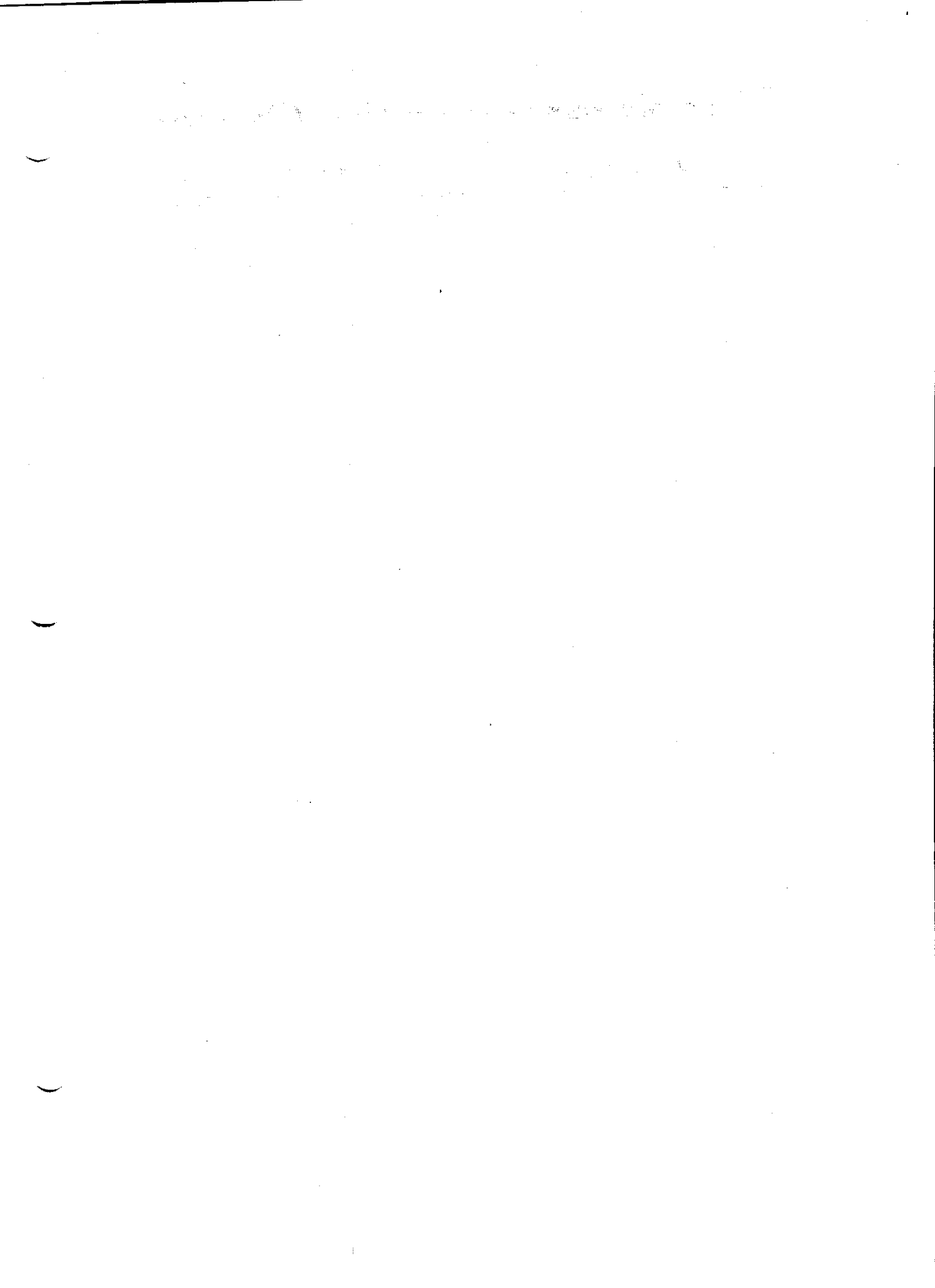


The Strategy of the Cross: God's Power and Wisdom

by Fr. Bill McCarthy

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The Cross

Fr. Bill McCarthy, MSA

My Father's House

Jesus used signs and symbols as well as words to impress spiritual truths and principles upon us, His followers. He uses water to express cleansing from sin and unrighteousness, bread and wine to express spiritual nourishments and oil to signify the empowerment of His Spirit. But His greatest symbol, which was much more than a symbol, was His Cross.

Life Through Death

It is the thought that Jesus' power comes through His death – which conquers death – that governs gospels. First, as a seed of grain dies to reproduce itself, so is it that the death of Jesus creates or gathers together a world-wide community.

Among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him "Sir, we should like to see Jesus." So Philip went and told Andrew, and the two of them went to tell Jesus. Then Jesus replied: "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. In truth, in very truth, I tell you, a grain of wheat remains a solitary grain unless it falls into the ground and dies; but if it dies, it bears a rich harvest. The man who loves himself is lost, but he who hates himself in this world will be kept safe for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; where I am, my servant will be. Whoever serves me will be honored by my Father."

The Greeks can only see Jesus because He died. In the follow section, which in part corresponds to the scene at Gethsemane in the Synoptics, it is made clear that the lifting up of Jesus on the cross – that is, the hour of His shame – is the hour of His glory; the cross is His crown. And through the death on the cross – His lifting up, as John, using a play on words, calls it – a power is at work which will eventually draw all things to God in reconciliation. At last, the real meaning of Christ's glory, or glorification – terms which have haunted the Gospel right up to this point – is made clear; it is not what men mean by glory – power, worldly success, fame; but the exact opposite – self-giving to the bitter end of the cross. The hour of His death is the hour of Christ. And this hour, in which Jesus' glory appears, is the hour of the judgement of this world.

Now is the hour of judgment for this world. (12:31)

Judaism had placed the judgment of the world in the future. Its accompaniments were clear – the victory of Israel over its enemies; the condemnation of the Gentiles:

*They all were looking for a King
To slay their foes and lift them high.*

But the judgment, John declares, begins at the death of Jesus, which, viewed from one side is the work of sinful men, but viewed from another is God's act of glorification. The ultimate "lifting up" is that of self-sacrifice. "The mark of the true glory," writes C. H. Dodd, "is precisely renunciation of personal security."

Review of the Signs: The Death of Jesus the Real Sign

The life of Jesus, as John has presented it in chapters 2-12, consists, then, of a series of signs that He is the true life and light of men, their judge and their Savior, the true expression of the glory of God. The presentation of the signs culminates in the death of Jesus as His glorification. To bring forth the significance of the culmination of the signs of Jesus in His death, it is necessary to ask what the relation is between the death and the signs.

Is the death to be understood as a sign like the signs that precede it? For example, is there any essential difference between the act of feeding the multitudes, as a sign that Jesus is the bread of life, and the act of dying on the cross? There is. The signs are pointers to what Jesus is. They refer beyond themselves to a truth about Jesus. What they signify exists in a reality outside them. The turning of water into wine illustrates the truth that with Jesus the old order of Judaism has passed into the new order of the Gospel.

But the same truth could be illustrated in another way. The sign is not essential to the truth to which it points, but only illustrative. But the death of Jesus is not simply an illustration or a sign; it is an actual death. It illustrates the love of Christ, yes. But it also is the love of Christ in action; it is what it illustrates. In no other way than by actually dying – not illustrating death – could the love of Christ be finally demonstrated as *real*.

Signs vs Deeds

Let us return to the Pope's tiara. The giving of the tiara to the poor as a sign is understandable. But – with all due reverence – it must be asserted that this "sign" does not carry the conviction of the self-imposed, actual, poverty of St. Francis of Assisi, in which sign and deed were one. So is it with the signs of Jesus as compared with His death. The signs point to the intent and potentiality of Jesus to be the bread of life and light of the world, to the truth that He is these. But in the cross, the intent of Jesus has become deed; the reality signified in the signs is there made actual. The death of Jesus *is* that to which it points. It not only indicates the principle of self-giving.

Consider the life of a home. The mother wears a golden ring as a sign of her marriage and of her status as mother in her home. But the ring in itself avails nothing. What draws a family to a mother is a life of self-giving, in which the meaning of the ring is lived out and a mother *is* what her ring signifies her to be. Where sign and life are one, the mother has potency to draw her children to herself.

So it is with the death of Jesus; it *is* what the signs had pointed to. As *actual self-giving*, the death of Jesus possesses a reality that the signs do not possess. In it, the idea has become deed; the sign is *really lived*; and so "if I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto myself." Life and power come through the *actual* self-giving. Claims to Messiahship of all kinds are cheap; signs are cheap. But death is not cheap. And, because it costs, it is in the death the glory is finally revealed. The cross – not as a symbol or an idea – but as an actual act of self-giving is, for John, the point where God's glory is actually seen. Not the sign, not the intent, but the deed is the manifestation of the glory. Drinkwater was right: men have need of the deed.

We know the paths our feet should press,
Across our hearts are written Thy decrees
Yet now, O Lord, be merciful to bless
With more than these.

Knowledge we ask not – knowledge Thou hast lent,
But, Lord, the will, – there lies our bitter need,
Give us to build above the deep intent
The deed, the deed.

The Cross of Each Day

Our Lord, addressing himself to all men, speaks of the daily Cross. And these words of Jesus retain their fullest value. They are words spoken to all men who want to follow Him. There is no such thing as a Christianity without the Cross, designed for soft and pusillanimous Christian with no sense of sacrifice. Our Lord's word state a condition that is absolutely necessary, a *sine qua non*. *Whoever does not take us his cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple.*

A Christianity from which we tried to remove the cross of voluntary mortification and penance under the pretext that these practices are the remains of the Dark Ages or of an outworn mediaeval era, quite inappropriate for a modern Humanistic Age, would be an insipid Christianity; a Christianity in name only. It would not have kept intact the doctrine of the Gospels, nor would it serve to induce men to follow in Christ's footsteps (The Eight Beatitudes, J. Orlandis). It would be a Christianity without the Redemption, without Salvation.

Symptoms of Lukewarmness

One of the clearest symptoms of lukewarmness having entered into a soul is precisely such an abandoning of the Cross, a contempt for little mortifications, a scorning of anything that in some way involves sacrifice and self-denial. On the other hand, to flee from the Cross is to turn one's back on holiness and joy; because one of the fruits of the mortified soul is just this capacity to relate to God and other people, and also a profound peace, even in the midst of tribulations and external difficulties. The person who abandons mortification is inevitably ensnared by his sense and becomes incapable of any supernatural thought.

There is no progress in the interior life without a spirit of sacrifice and mortification. St. John of the Cross says that if few people reach a high state of union with God it is because so many do not want to. And the same saint writes: *and if anyone wants one day to possess Christ, ever let him seek him without the Cross* (St. John of the Cross, The Living Flame of Love).

We should not forget then that mortification is closely related to joy, and that when our heart is purified it becomes humbler, so that it can have closer dealings with God and other people. *This is the great paradox of Christian mortification. It would seem that accepting and, furthermore, seeking suffering ought to cause good Christians, in practice, to be the saddest of people, the men 'who have the worst time of it'.*

The reality is quite different. Mortification only produces sadness when there is in its practice too much selfishness and a lack of generosity and love of God. Sacrifice always brings with it joy in the midst of pain, the happiness of knowing that we are fulfilling God's will, and of making the effort to love him. Good Christians live 'quasi tristes, semper etiam gaudentes' (1 Cor 8:10) as though they were sad, but really always filled with joy (Sacrifice and Joy, R.M. deBalbin).

The Cross in the Little Things of Each Day

The daily cross. '*Nulla dies sine cruce!*' No day without its cross; not a single day in which we are not to shoulder the Cross of the Lord, no day during which we are not to accept his yoke ...

The way to our personal sanctification should daily lead us to the cross. This way is not a sorrowful one, because Christ himself comes to our aid, and in his company there is no room for sadness. *I like to repeat, with my soul filled with joy, that there is not a single day without a cross – 'the' Cross (Christ is passing by, J. Escriva).*

Our Lord's Cross, which we have to carry each day, is certainly not the cross produced by our selfishness, our envy, our laziness, etc. It is not to be found in the conflicts produced by our 'old man' and our disordered love of self. That does not come from God; it does not sanctify.

Meeting the Cross

Occasionally, we will meet the Cross in some great difficulty, in a serious and painful illness, in an economic disaster, in the death of a loved one ... do not forget that being with Jesus means we shall most certainly come upon his Cross. When we abandon ourselves into God's hands, He frequently permits us to taste sorrow, loneliness, opposition, slander, defamation and ridicule, coming both from within and from without. This is because he wants to mould us into His own image and likeness. He even tolerates our being called lunatics and our being taken for fools.

This is the time to love passive mortification, which comes, hidden perhaps, or barefaced and insolent, when we least expect it. Our Lord will give us the strength we need to carry that Cross with elegance and He will fill us with unimaginable graces and fruits. We will understand that God conveys his benedictions in many ways and frequently blesses his friends by making them share in his Cross and making them co-redeemers with him.

Petty Annoyances

However, we will normally find the Cross each day in the sort of petty annoyances that may occur at work, and which usually present themselves to us through people around us. It may be something unexpected, the difficult character of a person with whom we have to live, plans perhaps that have to be changed at the last minute, stubborn materials or instruments of work that fail us when we most need them. Discomfort, maybe caused by cold, or heat or noise ... misunderstandings. A below-par seediness that impairs our efficiency on a particular day.

We have to accept these daily pinpricks courageously, offering them to God in a spirit of reparation without complaint. Those mortifications that crop up unexpectedly can help us, if we receive them well, to grow in the spirit of penance that we need so much, and to improve in the virtues of patience, of charity, of understanding; that is to say, *in holiness*. If we receive our setbacks with a bad spirit, it can cause us to rebel, or to become impatient or discouraged. Many Christians have lost their joy at the end of the day, not because of big reverses, but because they have not known how to sanctify the tiredness caused by work, or the little snags and minor frustrations which have arisen during the day.

Accepting The Cross

When we accept the Cross – little or great – it produces peace and joy in the midst of pain and is laden with merits for eternal life. Not accepting the Cross, the soul becomes thwarted or inwardly rebellious. This soon appears externally in the form of despondency and bad humor. *To carry one's Cross is something great. Great... It means facing up to life courageously, without weakness or meanness. It means that we turn into moral energy those difficulties which will never be lacking in our existence; it means understanding human sorrow; and, finally, it means knowing really how to love (Paul VI Address, 1967).* The Christian who goes through life systematically avoiding

sacrifice will not find God, will not find happiness. What he will have been taking care to avoid is his own sanctity.

Offering Up Disappointments – Details of Mortification

If any man would come after me, let him deny himself ... As well as accepting the Cross that we meet on our way, often unexpectedly, we must look for other little mortification so as to keep alive the spirit of penance that God asks us for. In order to make progress in the interior life it is a great help to have several little mortifications in mind, fixed in advance, decided on beforehand, so that we do them every day.

These mortifications, intentionally sought out through love of God, will be of great value in helping us to overcome laziness, to counter that selfishness which seems ready to burst out at every moment, to beware of pride, etc. Some will be of benefit to us in our work, having their effect on details of punctuality, order, intensity of concentration, and the care of the tools or equipment we use. Others will be aimed at enabling us to live charity better, particularly with the people we live and work with: knowing how to smile although we find it hard, showing appreciation for others, facilitating their work, having consideration for them in a pleasant manner, serving them in the little things of ordinary life, and never losing our temper with them.

Other mortifications can be directed towards overcoming our desire for comfort, at keeping a guard over our internal and external senses, at overcoming our curiosity: we can have in mind specific mortifications at meals, in our personal appearance, etc. They do not have to be very big things, but we do need to acquire the habit of doing them with constancy and for love of God.

As the general tendency of human nature is in the direction of avoiding anything that demands effort, we must be very exacting in these matters, so as not to be satisfied simply with having good intentions. At times it will prove useful to write them down, so that we can go over them in the examination of conscience, or at other moments of the day, so as not to forget them. Let us remember too, that the mortifications most pleasing to God are those which have reference to charity, to the apostolate, and the faithful fulfilment of our duties.

Let us tell Jesus, as we finish our dialogue with Him, that we are prepared to follow Him, carrying our cross today and every day.

Lent: A Time For Penance

Fasting and Other Signs of Penance in Jesus' Preaching

Fasting was and always will be one more sign of the spirit of penance that God asks of man. *In the Old Testament we can find gradually developing with ever-increasing richness, the religious sense of penance, as a personal religious act, which aims at its end love for and abandonment in God* (Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution).

When it is accompanied by prayer, fasting can be used to manifest humility before God. The man who fasts turns towards God in an attitude of total dependence and abandonment. In Holy Scripture we see how fasting and other works of penance were performed before the commencement of any difficult task, to implore forgiveness for sin, to obtain the cessation of a calamity, to gain the grace needed for the fulfilment of a mission, to prepare oneself to come face to face with God, etc.

Fruits of Fasting

John the Baptist, who well knew the fruits of fasting, taught his disciples the importance and need of practicing this penance. He coincided in this with the Pharisees who were pious and loved the law so that John's followers were surprised that Jesus had not instilled it into his own disciples. But Our Lord came to the defense of His own. *Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?* (Mt 9:15). The *bridegroom*, according to the prophets, is God himself who manifests His love for men (cf Is 54:5).

Here Christ declares His divinity once again and calls His disciples the friends of the bridegroom, his own friends. They are with him and they do not need to fast. Nevertheless, When the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast. When Jesus is no longer visibly present, they will have need of mortification if they are to see Him with the eyes of their soul.

Penance – A Requisite of Interior Life

The whole penitential meaning of the Old Testament was no more than a shadow of what was to come. *Penance – a requisite of interior life, confirmed as such by the religious experience of mankind, and the object of a special precept of divine revelation – takes on new dimensions infinitely more vast and profound in Christ and in the Church* (Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution).

In early times the Church preserved penitential practices in the spirit laid down by Jesus. The *Acts of the Apostles* mention celebrations of the cult accompanied by fasting. Throughout his overflowing apostolic work, St. Paul is not satisfied with merely suffering hunger and thirst when circumstances so demanded, but repeatedly added the practice of deliberate fasting. And the Church, as always, remains faithful to this penitential exercise, determining at each season the days when the faithful must fast, and recommending this pious practice along with opportune advice concerning it in spiritual direction.

Other Forms of Corporal Mortification

Fasting, however is only one form of penance. There are other forms of corporal mortification that make our conversion and our union with God easier. We can ask ourselves today how we live this spirit of penance that our Mother the Church wants us to live throughout our lives, but in a special way during the liturgical season of Lent in which we now find ourselves.

Contemplating the Holy Humanity of Jesus in the Way of the Cross

Do Penance. Jesus says at the beginning of His public life, just as John the Baptist had already preached, and as later the Apostles were to do at the beginning of the Church. We need penance for our life as Christians in order to make reparation for so many sins of our own and of others. We would be unable to come to know Jesus Christ without yet having attained a true spirit of penance and conversion; we would still be dominated by sin. We must not avoid it out of fear, or because we are skeptical about its usefulness, or because we lack a supernatural outlook. *You are afraid of penance? ... Of penance, which will help you to obtain Life everlasting? And yet, in order to preserve this poor present life, don't you see how men will submit to all the cruel torture of a surgical operation?* (*The Way*, J. Escriva). Avoiding penance would mean at the same time avoiding holiness and, perhaps, because of the consequences of this, rejecting salvation itself.

To Identify Ourselves with Christ

Our desire to identify ourselves with Christ will lead us to accept His invitation to suffer with Him. Lent prepares us to contemplate the events of the Passion and Death of Jesus. Particularly on the Fridays of Lent, which remind us in a special way of that first Good Friday when Christ

consummated the Redemption, we can meditate on the events of that day, which have been gathered together for us in the traditional devotion of The Way of the Cross. *Here indeed you have a sturdy and fruitful devotion. Spend a few moments each Friday going over those fourteen points of Our Lord's Passion and Death. I assure you that you will gain strength for the whole of the week* (Blessed Escriva).

Along the Via Dolorosa

In this devotion we will contemplate the most Sacred Humanity of Christ, who reveals Himself to us suffering in His flesh as a man, but without losing the majesty of God. As we accompany Jesus along his *via dolorosa*, we will be able to re-live those central moments of the Redemption of the world, and contemplate Jesus as He is condemned to death and the Cross is laid upon him (2nd Station). We will see Him set out on a path that we must follow. Each time Jesus sinks to the ground under the weight of the Cross, we should be filled with horror, because it is our sins and the sins of all men that weigh God down.

Then, desires of conversion will spring to our hearts: *The exhausted body of Jesus staggers now beneath the huge Cross. His most loving Heart can barely summon up another breath of life for His flagging muscles, for His poor wounded limbs ... You and I can say nothing: now we know why the Cross of Jesus weighs so much. We weep over our wretched failings and also for the terrible ingratitude of the human heart. From the depths of our soul there comes an act of real contrition that lifts us up from the prostration of sin. Jesus has fallen that we might get up, once and for all* (ibid: *The Way*).

Our contemplation of these sufferings of Jesus, and the voluntary mortifications we undertake in an endeavor to unite ourselves to Christ's eagerness to redeem, will also increase our apostolic spirit during this Lent. He gave His life in order to bring men close to God.

Our Daily Work – Source of Little Passive Mortifications

The source of the mortifications God asks of us is almost always to be found in our daily work. Mortifications right from the start of the day: getting up promptly at the time we have fixed for rising, overcoming laziness from the first moment; punctuality; our work finished down to the last detail; the discomfort of too much heat or cold; a smile even though we are tired or do not feel like smiling; sobriety in eating and drinking; order and care for our personal belongings and for the things we use; giving up our own opinion.

But for this we need above all to follow a particular piece of advice: *If you really want to be a penitent soul – both penitent and cheerful – you must above all stick to your daily periods of prayer, which should be fervent, generous and not cut short. And you must make sure that these minutes of prayer are not engaged in only when you feel the need, but at fixed times, whenever it is possible. Don't neglect these details. If you subject yourself to this daily worship of God, I can assure you that you will be always happy.* (ibid: *The Way*).

Active Mortifications

As well as those mortifications known as 'passive' – mortifications which present themselves to us without our looking for them – the mortifications that we propose to ourselves (and seek out) are called *active* mortifications. Amongst these, the mortifications which refer to the control of our internal senses are especially important for our internal senses are especially important for our interior progress and for enabling us to achieve purity of heart.

These are: *mortification of imagination* – avoiding that interior monologue in which fantasy runs wild, by trying to turn it into a dialogue with God, present in our soul in grace. We try to put a restraining check on that tendency of ours to go over and over some little happening in the course of which we have come off badly. No doubt we have felt slighted, and have made much of an injury to our self-esteem, caused to us quite unintentionally. If we don't apply the brake in time, our conceit and pride will cause us to overbalance until we lose our peace and presence of God.

Mortification of the memory – avoiding useless recollections which make us waste time and which could lead us into more serious temptations. *Mortification of the intelligence* – so as to put it squarely to the business of concentrating on our duty at this moment and, also, on many occasions of surrendering our own judgement so as to live humility and charity with others in a better way. To sum up, we try to get rid of those internal habits that we know we would not like to see in a man or a woman of God. Let us make up our minds to keep close to Our Lord during these days by contemplating His most Sacred Humanity in the vivid and memorable scenes of The Way of the Cross. Let us see how, for our sakes, He walks along the Path of Sorrow.

St. Paul and the Cross

St. Paul understood this. That is why he says, "I come among you preaching Christ and Him crucified, the power of God and the wisdom of God." - a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles (both), but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the 'power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor 1:23-24).

Paul goes on to explain that God's foolishness (there can be, of course, no such thing) is wiser than man's wisdom (if there can be such a thing as man's wisdom uninspired by the Spirit). The same is true with Paul's comparison of God's weakness being stronger than man's strength.

He goes on: "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

Wisdom From the Spirit

"We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written:

'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him' –

"But God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

"The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This

what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment:

'For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?'

But we have the mind of Christ."

The Cross

St. Paul stated this principle with these words: "Let this mentality be in you which was also in Christ Jesus our Lord, that even though He was God, He did not see divinity itself as something to be clung to, but rather he emptied Himself, took the form of a servant, was born of low human state, became obedient, obedient unto death, death on the cross. Therefore, God highly exalted Him, and gave him a name, a name above all names, so that at the name of Jesus Christ every knee must bend in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, and proclaim to the glory of the Father that Jesus is Lord" (Phil 2:5-11).

Strategy for World Peace

St. Paul is showing us the greatest strategy for world peace; that this, the strategy of Jesus – the life laid down, a disarmed life, the strategy of the cross, which Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:18, "is foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews." But God has made "Christ crucified the power of God and the wisdom of God" for His people.

Law of Sowing and Reaping

In the cross we discover the law of sowing and reaping: If we sow with the sword – if we sow violence – we reap violence and the sword. If we sow with love and forgiveness, peace is our reward. And yet, the strategy of the cross is that narrow road that few men and women on the face of the earth have found. Ghandi discovered it. So did Martin Luther King, along with Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Franz Jaegerstaetter and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. But very few among the followers even of Jesus Christ, have fully practiced it.

Yet, all of us realize whenever we come from a high place, whenever it is a question of "I'm right and you're wrong," "I'm good and you're bad," "I have it and you don't," "I'm rich and you're not," "I'm religious and you're not" – that we will always sow the seeds of resentment. However, whenever it is a question of coming down from our high place and allowing emptiness to become our strategy; whenever it is a question of "I may be wrong;" or "Could you help me;" or "I need you;" or "I'm sorry," then somehow, mysteriously, the weaves of the Spirit begin to rise.

Sacraments of Vulnerability

Whenever we can exercise those sacraments of vulnerability – an outstretched hand, a tear, a bent neck, a bowed knee, a sitting position – whenever we can become as little children and allow a smile, a touch, a hand lifted up and outstretched to our neighbor, especially to the least, the lost and the last, then somehow, we become bridgebuilders of peace.

The Disarmed Life

Jesus Christ taught His followers to live such a disarmed life. He really gave us only one commandment: "My little children, a new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another

as I have loved you.” And yet, this is no easy matter. For me, personally, this realization came pounding home when I made a retreat with Father Charles McCarthy, who, along with his family, really live the strategy of a disarmed life. Father Mac said: “To treat a person like a thing is violence. To treat a thing like a person is idolatry. To treat a person like a person is simply justice.”

Agape Love

To treat a person like yourself is love; but it is Old Testament love, a high form of love, to be sure. But to treat a person like Christ, with *agape* love, which means to always forgive anyone who has offended you, is divine. And, to be personally willing, at least in some way, to lay down your life for your enemies, is Christianity.

So, let this mindset of love be in us, which as also in Christ Jesus, who came to us not as a lawyer, for we would have debated Him; not as a scholar, for we would not allow Him to teach us His concepts; not as a military person, for he would have won the day by strength. And what do you do with love? Allow it to transform you, or nail it to a tree?

He did not come flaming through the sky with swift compulsion and command. No, not that! But when He came, there was just the tinniest pause in the pulse of life. He came with all our old simplicities unmarred, with no rejection of the flesh we bear, the hearts we love with, or the pain we know. He came to sleep our sleep and with us to dream our dreams. He came as a baby. He came as a simple itinerant preacher. He came as a God who comes to us, as the God who kneels before us, who washes our feet, and yes, the God who dies on the cross for our sins.

“Hate me, hit me, hurt me, nail me to a tree, and I still love you,” as the play, *Godspell*, says so well.

Five Stances Embracing The Cross

1. **Run From It.** This is what a highly hedonistic, materialistic society does – eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. *No pain – All gain ... we hope.*
2. **Drop The Cross.** Put it up for a while, but when temptations come, drop it. After all, human nature cannot be expected to be heroic. *A little gain – but still, no pain.*
3. **Drag The Cross.** Put it up begrudgingly. Let everyone know your pain and suffering. Do not rejoice in it. Drag. Drag others down with you. *Pain and small partial gain.*
4. **Accept The Cross.** Not with full rejoicing. Live a life of acceptance. *Pain and Gain!*
5. **Embrace The Cross – Rejoice in it .** *All Pain – All Gain!*

Conclusion

Bishop Fulton Sheen, after a powerful experience before the crucified savior, made this poem famous.

I slipped His fingers
I escaped His feet
I ran and hid,
for Him I really feared to meet.

Then one day I met Him being fettered to a tree.
He turned and smiled and looked at me.
For neither by speed nor strength could He prevail,
each hand and foot was being pinioned by a nail.

He could not hold me nor clasp me if He tried.
But with those eyes, He bade me reach His side.

For pity sake," cried I, "I'll set you free."
"No," rather said He, "take up your cross
And come and follow Me."

This yoke is easy this burden light,
Not hard nor grievous if you wear it tight.
And so did I begin to follow Him
Who could not move
An uncaught captive
In the arms of love.

A Final Poem

When Jesus came to Golgatha,
they hung Him upon a tree.
And drove great nails in hand and feet.
And made a Calvary.

Then they crowned Him with a crown of thorns
red were His wounds and deep.
For those were crude and cruel times
and human life was cheap.

But when Jesus came to the States,
many simply passed Him by.
Oh, they did not hurt a hair of His,
but they let His Spirit die.

And when we did He cried, "forgive them,
for they know not what they do,"
And still it would rain a winter's rain
that would soak Him through and through.

And when we all went home complacent
without a soul to see.
Jesus would crouch against a wall
and cry for Calvary.

My Father's House
P.O. Box 22
Moodus, CT 06469
860-873-1581 860-873-2357
www.myfathershouse.com
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Seven Words from the Cross

Seven Words to the Cross

The cross is the central point of God's redemptive action and our salvation. St. Paul clearly taught, "When I come among you I preach Jesus Christ and him crucified, the power of God and the wisdom of God" (*1 Cor 2:2*). For the cross was a stumbling block to the more philosophical Greeks and a scandal to the religious Jews (cf. *1 Cor 1:22*). It was difficult for Paul and the early Christians to explain to the Greeks that God could die in the person of his Son. Philosophically they knew that God was eternal and could not die. So how do you explain Christ crucified to them? The Hebrews had an added problem for in their Scriptures they were taught cursed is anyone that hangs upon a tree. So how do you explain to them that Christ, the Son of God, hanging upon a tree, was not cursed?

Kinosis

St. Paul urges us in that tremendous ode to humility:

Though he was in the form of God,
Jesus did not deem equality with God
Something to be grasped at,

- 1) Rather, he emptied himself
- 2) And took the form of a slave,
- 3) Being born in the likeness of men.
- 4) He was known to be of human estate,
- 5) And it was thus that he humbled himself,
- 6) Obediently accepting even death,
- 7) Death on a cross.

HUMILIATION

Because of this,

- 1) God highly exalted him
- 2) And bestowed on him the name
- 3) Above every other name,
- 4) So that at Jesus' name
- 5) Every knee must bend
- 6) In the heavens, on the earth
and under the earth
- 7) And every tongue proclaim
To the glory of God the Father:
JESUS CHRIST IS LORD!

EXALTATION

A tremendous secret

Jesus gives us here a tremendous secret into the spiritual life. Since God's ways are not man's ways, we must die to the one to embrace the other. To go up, we must first go down.

The story of two mountains

There is a close relationship between two mountains mentioned in Scripture that is similar to the relationship found between the first and second acts of a two-act drama. For Jesus, who climbed the Mount of Beatitudes to preach the Sermon on the Mount, also had to climb the Mount of Calvary to fully practice what He preached.

The Sermon on the Mount always includes crucifixion. Anyone who puts the beatitudes into practice must both die to self and be crucified by the world. Humility, meekness, purity of heart, love and forgiveness always involve a death to the self.

The day that Jesus taught the Beatitudes, He signed his own death warrant. For He realized that one way to make enemies and to challenge the spirit of the world was to come against it. The world has a spirit as each age has a spirit. There are certain unanalyzed assumptions which govern the conduct of our world in general and our country in particular. Anyone who challenges these worldly maxims, such as "You live only once," "Get as much out of life as you can," "Who will ever know about it?" "What is sex for if not for pleasure?" is bound to make himself unpopular. For in the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord speaks strongly against *riches, revenge, worldly laughter, getting even, popularity, unbridled sex, armed might, and soft comfort*. He turned them upside down.

To those who say, "You cannot be happy unless you are rich," Jesus said, "Woe to the rich and blessed are the poor in spirit."

To those who say, "Don't let them get away with it," Jesus taught, "Blessed are the meek."

To those who say, "Laugh and the world laughs with you," Jesus said, "Blessed are they who mourn."

To those who say, "If nature gave you sex instincts, you ought to give them free expression otherwise you will become frustrated," Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure of heart."

To those who say, "Seek to be popular and well known," Jesus said, "Blessed are you who men revile and persecute and speak all manner of evil against you falsely because of me."

To those who say, "In time of peace, prepare for war," and "We support our troops," Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers."

Jesus scorns the cliches around which headlines, movies and novels are written. He proposes to burn what the world worships, to conquer errant sex instincts instead of allowing them to make slaves of men and women, and to tame economic conquests instead of making happiness consist of an abundance of things external to the soul. Jesus scorns all false beatitudes which make happiness depend upon self-expression, license, or having a good time – the "eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you die" philosophy – because they will not bring us perfect peace, true love or real happiness. Instead, He warns that they will bring mental disorders, unhappiness, false hopes, fears and anxieties.

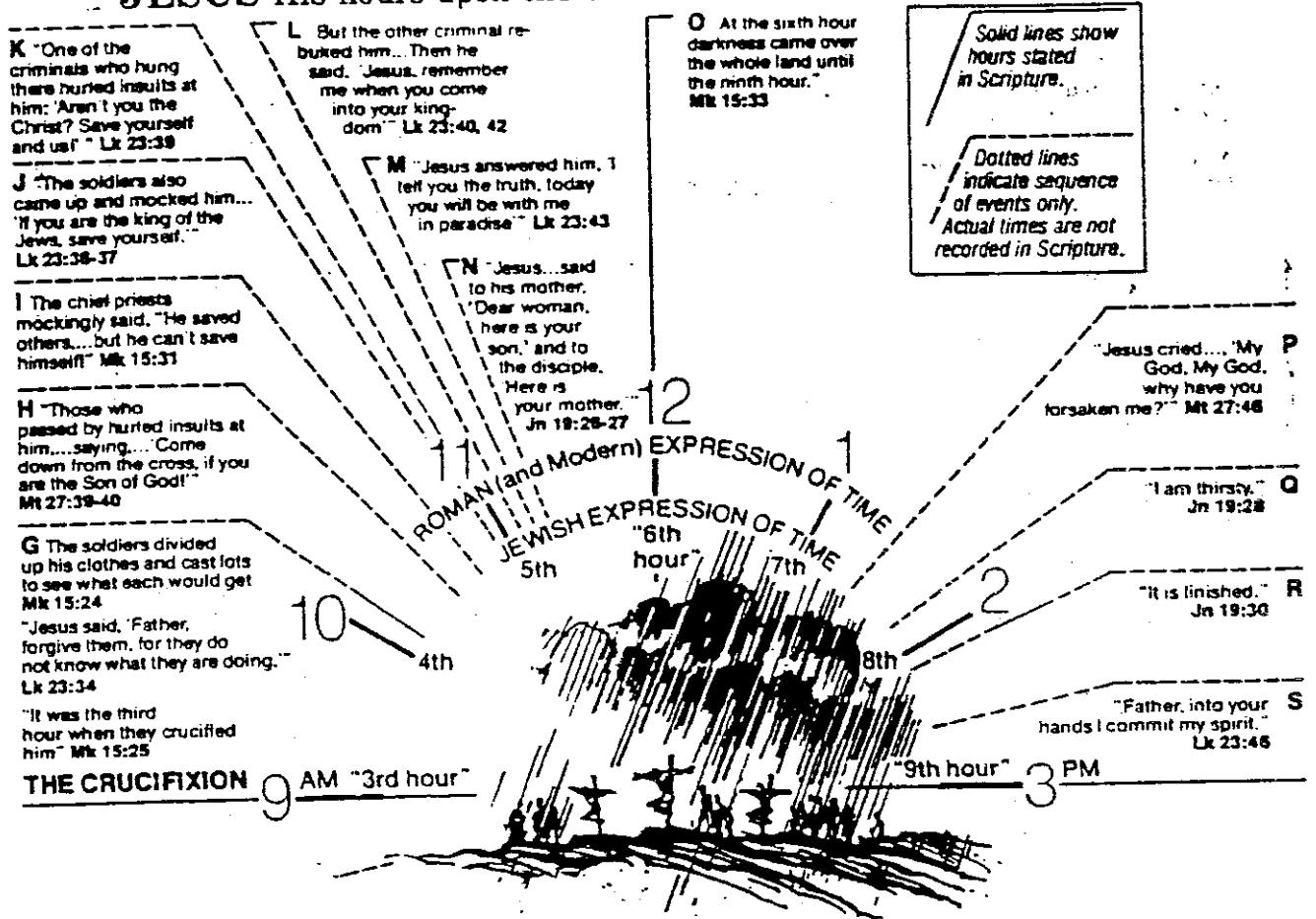
At the cross

All of us must meet at the cross because we are saved precisely through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the great Paschal mystery: we must die with Christ to selfishness and sin so that we can rise with him in holiness of life.

A chronology of Jesus' six hours on the cross

Jesus actually spent six painful hours on the cross. We read, "It was the third hour when they crucified him" (Mk 15:25). We then read, "Jesus said, 'Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing'" (Lk 23:34). Then we read, "And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes they cast lots to see what each would get" (Mk 15:24). Matthew tells us, "Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!'" Then in the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders mocked him. 'He saved others,' they said, 'but he cannot save himself. He's the king of Israel! Let him come down from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, "I am the Son of God!"' In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him." (Mt 27:39-44). Mark tells us, "The chief priests mockingly said, 'He saved others...but he cannot save himself'" (Mk 15:31). Luke tells us, "The soldiers also came up and mocked him. 'If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself'" (Lk 23:36-37). Luke also tells us, "One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him. 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us.' But the other criminal rebuked him... Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom'" (Lk 23:39-40, 42). Jesus answered him, "I tell you, this day you will be with me in paradise" (Lk 23:43). Then Jesus said to his mother, "Woman, behold your son" and to the disciple, "behold your mother" (Jn 19:26-27).

JESUS His hours upon the cross



Mark goes on to tell us, "At the sixth hour, darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour" (*Mk* 15:33). And Matthew adds, "About the ninth hour, Jesus cried out in a loud voice. 'Eloi, Eloi, lemma Sabachthani' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of those standing there heard this they said, 'He's calling Elijah.' Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick and offered it to Jesus to drink. But the rest said, 'Leave him alone. Let us see if Elijah comes to save him'" (*Mt* 28: 46-49). John then tells us Jesus said, "I thirst" (*Jn* 19:28) and adds that he said, "It is finished" (v. 30). Luke tells us that his final words were, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (*Lk* 23:46). And Matthew adds, "And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rock split" (*Mt* 28:50-51). "When the centurion and those who were with him guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified and exclaimed, 'surely he was the Son of God! Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons'" (*Mt* 27:54-56).

Seven words from the cross

And so you can see there are seven words to the cross and seven words from the cross. That is, there are seven things that were spoken to Jesus by the bystanders and seven things that Jesus spoke from the cross to them and to his Father. Four of the words Jesus spoke to his Father. One word he spoke to his mother and to St. John. One word he spoke to the soldiers, mentioning that he was thirsty. And one word he spoke to the good thief.

The first word

The very first word that Jesus spoke from the cross was, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." The whole life, death and ministry of Jesus was one of mercy and forgiveness. I know of no place in the New Testament that anyone explicitly asked for forgiveness. Nevertheless, Jesus, knowing their need, went around giving forgiveness in advance. That is, he for-gave. He forgave Mary Magdalene, the doubting Thomas, the bungling Peter, the woman at the well. He told the marvelous story of the father's forgiveness of the prodigal son. He would have forgiven Judas. And now from the altar of the cross, the new and eternal mercy seat, he forgives the very soldiers who are crucifying him, even making an excuse for them, for they know not what they do. The overwhelming mercy of God, imaged in Jesus, is the source of the divine mercy. St. Faustina was given a mission to proclaim the overwhelming mercy of God made manifest in his Son, especially on the cross. The second encyclical of Pope John Paul II concerned "The Father who is Rich in Mercy." The greatest attribute in the heart of the Father and in the heart of the Son was mercy. Love multiplied to its highest power equals mercy. All of us can learn a lesson from Jesus, becoming ambassadors of mercy, reconciling the world to Christ through our acts of forgiveness.

The second word

The second word from the cross is, "Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother." Mary is the woman of the Scriptures, the mother of the Church and the mother of the Christ within us. She was explicitly given to us at the cross when we, the Church, would be born from the blood and water that flowed from the side of Jesus. For just as Eve, the spouse of Adam, was born from his side, so is the Church born through water (baptism) and blood (the Eucharist) from

the side of Christ. Christ has three theological bodies: his own incarnate body hanging there upon the cross; his Eucharistic body present upon our altars; and his Mystical Body, the Church. Therefore, Mary is not only the mother of the incarnate Son on the cross but is also the mother of the Eucharist and the mother of the Church. In the Book of Revelation we read, "Satan, angry at the woman, goes to war on the rest of her children, that is, those who keep his commandments and bear witness to his name" (Rv 12:17). Here, Mary is given to us in the person of John, "Son, behold your mother" and we were given to her as well, "Woman, behold your son." Jesus came to give away everything: his divinity, his life, his gospel, his spirit, his very death. But there is one great gift that he reserved to the last and that was the gift of his mother.

The third word

In response to the good thief that tradition calls Dismus, Jesus said, "This day you will be with me in paradise" (Lk 23:43). Although initially he joined with his partner in jeering Jesus, nevertheless moved by grace, he came to his senses and defended Jesus against the sneers of his confreere. "We deserve what we are getting. But this man has done nothing wrong." And then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Lk 23:42). Jesus, teaching all of us to pray for the grace of final perseverance, said, "This day you will be with me in paradise." Paradise, of course, included purgatory as well as heaven. We know from other Scriptures that Jesus did not enter heaven until after he talked to Mary Magdalene on Easter Sunday morning, saying, "I have not yet ascended to the Father." And St. Peter says that "he went to the abode of the dead (*sheol*) to proclaim the good news" (1 Pet 3:18-20; 4:6). Therefore we know that the good thief spent at least three days in purgatory.

The fourth word

The fourth word from the cross is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46). Jesus was actually reciting Psalm 22 which began, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", a great messianic psalm of David that continues, "But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: 'He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him'" (v. 6) "I am poured out like water and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me" (v. 14). "A band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. They have numbered all my bones. People stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing" (v. 16-18). "Revere him all you descendents of Israel! You who fear the Lord, praise him. All you descendents of Jacob, honor him for he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help (v. 23-24). "Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn – for he has done it" (v. 30-31). St. Paul tells us that he who was without sin became sin and some of the mystics tell us that, at a certain point on the cross, Jesus had so taken upon himself the sins of the world that he, as it were, became sin. At that point, the Father turned away and could not look at him. This is the mystery of how Christ took upon himself our iniquity.

The fifth word

The fifth word from the cross is, "I thirst." Jesus had said, "Come to me, all you who are thirsty and I will give you fountains of living water that will spring up from within." "Just before

he was hung upon the cross, they offered him gall and vinegar to drink but he refused to drink it" (Mt 27:34). Now, upon the cross, he says, "I thirst." In a physical sense, he had lost so much water and blood that most likely he was dehydrated. His body must have screamed for water. But in the spiritual sense, realizing that for so many he would die in vain, his soul was screaming in thirst for them. Mother Teresa has established a whole spirituality to quench the thirst of Jesus. Through our acts of prayer and self-denial, not only can we make up what is lacking in the cross of Christ but we can eternally quench his thirst for holy ones.

The sixth word

The sixth word from the cross is, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Jesus lived out of the Father. He told us, with utmost earnestness, that he did nothing on his own but only what he saw the father doing (Jn 5:19), that his meat was to do only the will of the Father. The whole spirituality of Jesus was centered in the Father. He was, above all, the Son of the Father, having lived throughout his life listening to, discerning and obeying the still voice of his Father, he now commends himself back to the Father's loving hands. One of the cardinals had a vision of Easter Sunday morning. All of heaven was hushed as Jesus suffered, died, and was buried. But with the Easter dawn came rejoicing, for over the horizon the Father saw his Son running towards him. Their embrace of love was ecstatic. Picture Jesus rushing into the arms of his Father crying "Abba, Abba." Picture the Father crying, saying "Jeshuah, Jeshuah."

The seventh word

The seventh word from the cross is, "It is finished." Scott Hahn says it refers to the fourth cup that he did not drink during the Passover meal, but now that he drinks to its fullness in his suffering and death on the cross. He previously said, in his Last Supper discourse, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do and now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began" (Jn 17:4-5).

As actual self-giving, the death of Jesus possesses a reality that the signs do not possess. In it, the idea has become deed; the sign is really lived; and so "if I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto myself." Life and power come through the actual self-giving. Claims to Messiahship of all kinds are cheap; signs are cheap. But death is not cheap. And, because it costs, it is in the death that the glory is finally revealed. The cross – not as a symbol or as an idea – but as an actual act of self-giving is, for John, the point where God's glory is actually seen. Not thee sign, not the intent, but the deed is the manifestation of the glory. Men have need of the deed.

We know the paths our feet should press,
Across our hearts are written thy decrees
Yet now, O Lord, be merciful to bless
With more than these.

Knowledge we ask not – knowledge Thou hast lent,
But, Lord, the will – there lies our bitter need,
Give us to build above the deep intent
The deed, the deed.

Seven words to the cross

Not only did Jesus speak seven words from the cross but those that were on Calvary's Hill that afternoon addressed seven words to him on the cross.

The first word

The first word spoken to him was by the humanists of that day. They were called passers-by. This is a significant term for it suggests those who never remain long enough with God to go deep. They think themselves wise because they have a passing acquaintance with God. We have their counterparts today, all those who want religion without a cross, all those who believe that man is naturally good, that progress is inevitable through science and that human reason and human effort is able to restore peace to the world and to consciences. They want a public school educational system without God. They believe in separation of state from God. They believe in a human morality without religion and a Christ without a cross and a Christianity without sacrifice. It is they who speak the first word to the cross, "Vah, you who destroy the temple of God, in three days rebuild it; save yourself: if you be the Son of God, come down from the cross" (*Mt* 27:40). Jesus is no sooner on the cross than they asked him to come down, "Come down for your belief in divinity! Come down from your teaching on hell! Come down from your belief that what God has joined together no man shall put asunder! Come down from your belief in the high road of poverty, chastity and obedience. Come down from your belief in virginity and purity of heart. Come down from your belief in the uniqueness of your Church and infallibility. Come down from your belief in the Eucharistic presence. Come down and we will believe." And while these humanists jeer, there comes forth from the lips of Christ, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." They said, "Come down." They judged power by deliverance from pain. Jesus said, "Forgive." He judged power by deliverance from sin. They boasted of their superior wisdom and he reminded them that all such worldly wisdom was foolishness: "They know not what they do." A religion without a cross is the essence of humanism. The tragedy of such humanists is that they believe not in the sanctity of life but in the choice to kill, not in the purity of heart but in First Amendment protection for pornography. They do not believe in the sanctity of marriage or of woman but in prostitution among consenting adults. And yet the question remains. If he came down, in whom would we believe since there would be no one who would transcend our sinful human state.

The second word

The second word was spoken to him by the sinners of his day. "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Bishop Fulton Sheen says:

"There are two ways of coming to God: through the preservation of innocence; and through the loss of it. Some have come to God because they were good, like Mary, who was 'full of grace'; like Joseph, the 'just man'; like Nathaniel, 'in whom there was no guile'; or like John the Baptist, 'the greatest man ever born of woman.'

"But others have come to God who were bad, like the young man of the Gerasenes 'possessed of devils,' like Magdalen, out of whose corrupt soul the Lord cast seven devils; and like the thief at the right who spoke the second word to the cross.

"The world loves the mediocre. The world hates the very good and the very bad. The good are a reproach to the mediocre, and the evil are a disturbance. That is why Christ was crucified with thieves. Seven hundred years before, Isaias had prophesied that he would be

'reputed with the wicked' (*Is* 53:12). Luke verified it: 'And with the wicked was he reckoned' (*Lk* 22:37).

"So it was willed by God. This is his true position: Jesus among the worthless ones. During his life he was accused of eating and drinking with sinners; now they can accuse him of dying with them. and these companions on their crosses were not political prisoners, nor castoff capitalists from a proletarian revolution; they were just plain bandits – pure and simple.

"Here is a supreme instance of the Right Man in the right place: Christ among the bandits; the Redeemer in the midst of the unredeemed; the Physician among the lepers – for God does not work through culture but through grace. He does not ask men to be refined; he asks them to be penitent. Thus does God show that we become great not because of what we are but because of what he gives.

"God in his infinite wisdom had reached deep into the lower layers of humanity and picked out of its dregs two worthless derelicts; and he used one of them as the escort of his eternal Son.

"At the beginning of the crucifixion they both cursed and blasphemed the Savior. But suddenly the soul of one, lighted by fires from that central cross, turned to a King who was being mocked and asked to be one of his subjects: 'Lord, remember me when thou shalt come into thy kingdom' (*Lk* 23:42).

"Lord: He called him Lord! A real king is so easy to approach!

"Remember me: There was a touch of humor in asking God to remember. God had remembered him before he was born. That is why he is immortal. God had been following his soul down the corridors of time, and now the pursued asks the Pursuer to remember.

"When thou shalt come into thy kingdom: How did the thief know he had a kingdom? Maybe the crown of thorns spoke of a diadem, the crucifixion of a coronation, the nails of a sceptre, and the blood of royal purple. We can never judge people by the way they are dressed.

"No prayer to God is ever unanswered. From the central cross there flashed back: 'This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise' (*Lk* 23:43).

"This day: Evil has its hour, but God has his day.

"Thou: 'And he calleth his own sheep by name' (*Jn* 10:3). This was the foundation of Christian democracy. The soul of an outcast is of such value that the Eternal Word addresses him in the second person singular: 'Thou'.

"Shalt be with me in paradise: I wonder why hi said in paradise? To be with him is paradise.

"The mob on Calvary asked him to come down from the cross: the thief asked to be taken up! The masses would have believed if he preached a religion without a cross; the thief found his faith by hanging on a cross. This is the supreme instance of one bringing good out of evil. It is doubtful if the thief would have found goodness otherwise!

"Why is it that this thief found salvation? Why, on the other hand, did our Lord say to the chief priests and the ancients: 'Amen I say to you, that the publicans and the harlots shall go into the kingdom of God before you' (*Mt* 21:3)? Why did he lash out with whips at the merchants, and with his tongue scourge the so-called good people, calling them a 'brood of vipers' and 'whitened sepulchres'? And while speaking harshly to this group, why did he speak so kindly to the woman with five husbands, so gently to the publican Matthew, and so courteously to the good thief?

"It can only be because the capacity for conversion is greater in the really wicked than in the self-satisfied and complacent. The very emptiness of soul of the sinners is in itself an

occasion for receiving the compassion of God. self-disgust is the beginning of conversion, for it marks the death of pride." (F. J. Sheen, *Seven Words to the Cross*, Garden City Books, 1944, pages 20-23.)

The third word

The third word to the cross was spoken by the selfish, represented in the other thief, the so-called unrepentant thief who said, "If you are the Christ, save yourself and us." Salvation for him was not to be spiritual or moral but physical. Save what? Our souls? No! Save our bodies! What good is a savior if he cannot stop pain and pamper selfish interest. The world is filled with selfish people who think primarily of themselves. "What's in it for me?" is their question. Even when they sin, they say, "What harm does my sin do to anyone else?" Save thyself and us! Salvation for the selfish is for themselves and their class of people. If you are communist, salvation speaks only for the proletariat. If you are fascist, salvation speaks only for the nation. If you are Nazi, salvation speaks only for the race. If you are rich, salvation speaks only for the upper class. Not a word about salvation for the world, especially for the poor. How did our Lord answer this? He indirectly answered it when, looking down from the cross, he addressed himself to two beloved people: Mary, his beloved mother and John, his beloved disciple. He did not, however, address them as "Mary" and "John". No, he called his mother "woman", a rich scriptural title because she is the mother of all living. She was no longer to be his mother alone. He was the new Adam, she would be the new Eve. In so doing, he tells us that the water of baptism makes us closer to one another than the blood of relationship. Previously he had said, "Behold my mother and my brethren. For whoever shall do the will of God, he is my brother, and my sister and my mother" (*Mk* 3:34-35). The relationships that we have in Christ in the Spirit bring us closer to one another than those relationships we have in the flesh. For we the baptized are those "who are born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (*Jn* 1:13). To those who are selfish, Jesus continues to say, "My little children, a new commandment I give unto you that you love one another as I have loved you. The greatest love a man can have for his friends is to lay down his life for them" (cf. *Jn* 15:12-13).

The fourth word

The fourth word spoken by the bystanders was spoken by the intelligentsia, represented by the chief priests, scribes and Pharisees. "He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the king of Israel, let him now come down from the cross and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him now deliver him if he will have him; for he said: 'I am the Son of God'" (*Mt* 27:42-43). There will always be educated people who are not wise. In fact, most educated people do not use their education for God's purposes but for worldly interests. Very few educated people are wise. In all of history, wisdom is found more among farmers and servants and carpenters than in highly educated people. The closer a man remains to the earth, the more spiritual he usually is. That is why God warns us to lean not on our own understanding, for God's ways are not our ways. "As high as the heavens are above the earth, so are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts" (*Is* 55:8-9). St. Paul was right in saying to the intelligentsia of Corinth that the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. The intelligentsia say blessed are the rich and woe to the poor. God says it is the other way around. The intelligentsia say blessed are the playboys and woe to the virgins but God says the pure of heart shall see God. The intelligentsia say blessed are the front-runners and the prosperous but God says the first shall be last. The intelligentsia make their creed fit the way they live rather than making the way they live

fit the cross. Auschwitz happened at the hands of a highly educated German people. For educated egos will never save the world but only humble servants who follow the way of Jesus.

The fifth word

The fifth word spoken to the cross was spoken by the moderns who said, "Let us see if Elias will come to deliver him" (*Mt 27:49*). The Gospel calls them "bystanders at the cross." These original moderns love their puns and their humor at the expense of religion. Our Lord had just said, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Actually, it was spoken in Hebrew: "Eli, Eli, lemna Sabacthani." These bystanders knew very well what he meant but they wanted to mock him, and so they said, "This man is calling Elias. Let us see whether Elias will come to deliver him" (*Mt 27:47-49; Mk 15:34-36*). It was the typical attitude of many who think that religion means something else than it actually does, mistaking Eloi for Eli, and Elias for God. It mistakes religion for social service and confession for psychoanalysis. Their very words indicate indifference and false caution: "Wait, let us see. Take your time." The difficulties of the moderns are always verbal, never real. Those who remain away from God suffer from confusion of their own making. They always think that God is something else than he is and that the Church is something else than she is. It is not what they know as true that keeps them from salvation. It is what they know as false. They justify abortion by calling it choice and sodomy by calling it alternative life style. They justify adultery and fornication by saying it is "consenting adults." They justify idolatry by saying it is a separation of Church and state. Our Lord did not answer those who mocked him, nor does he answer those who mock him now. The perfect soul never permits itself to be drawn down to the level of those who mock for mockery is the fume of little hearts.

Little by little we subtract
Faith and fallacy from fact,
The illusory from the true,
And starve upon the residue.

The sixth word

The sixth word spoken to the cross was spoken by the sensationalists. "And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him and offering him vinegar, and saying: 'If you be the king of the Jews, save yourself'" (*Lk 23:36*). The sensationalists are the Roman soldiers. They were proud legionnaires of Rome's screaming eagles. Why did they refer to him mockingly as 'the king of the Jews'? Because in keeping with the spirit of paganism, they thought all gods were national gods. Even today, these sensationalists accuse the Church of doing nothing because it is not doing anything sensational. What is American television filled with? The wise and the holy? Or the sensational and the surface? What are our young people interested in? The sensational or the sane? That which turns their emotions on, or that which turns their spirits high? Sensationalists expect religion to be dramatic. They want a life of Christ as Hollywood does it but not as it was. All through the ages there have been groups who despise the simple and the humble. True religion happens most often in ordinary and unspectacular ways. Christ was born in a stable. His mother and foster father were not welcomed at an inn. God's ways are to choose the ordinary, the unsophisticated, the unworldly, the unsensational. There is nothing sensational about being crowned with thorns or falling three times beneath the cross, or being nailed to an infamous gibbet.

The seventh word

The seventh word spoken to the cross was spoken by the thinkers, imaged by the centurion who said, "Indeed, this was the Son of God." Right after Jesus had said, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit," the earth shook and the dead rose from their graves. The centurion was thinking about life and death as he broke the legs of the two thieves. Coming to the central cross and finding Christ dead, he ran a spear into his side. Blood and water trickled out and trickled down his spear and touched his hands. Tradition has it that he was immediately cured of a lifelong affliction. In any case, he glorified God by saying, "Indeed, this was the Son of God" (*Mt 27:54*). Just as many a soldier finds faith on a battlefield, so this centurion finds faith beneath the cross. "Thinkers" is the term used in contra-distinction to the intelligentsia who think they are educated. But the term thinkers here is understood to be all who concern them with the ultimate purpose of life: why was I born, why am I here, and where am I going? Thinkers are not necessarily educated nor even those who spend their lives in meditation. Rather they are those who once brought into contact with Christ crucified mysteriously understand the purpose of life, namely that we are sinners in need of a savior. Tradition calls this man Longinus, and it is said that the tip of his spear is contained above his huge statue in the center of St. Peter's Church in Rome. The Church honors him and all like him who, contemplating the cross, have come to be redeemed by it. For anyone who looks upon the human condition will ultimately come to realize that salvation does not come from the humanists nor from sinners nor from the selfish nor the worldly-wise nor the sensationalists but only through God's suffering Servant, hung upon the cross.