

THE SEVEN LAST WORDS
OF CHRIST

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Saint Bonaventure and Arnold of Bonneval

Translated by Fr. Robert Nixon, OSB

TAN Books
Gastonia, North Carolina

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Cover design by Jordan Avery

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ISBN: 978-1-5051-2924-3

Kindle ISBN: 978-1-5051-2925-0

ePUB ISBN: 978-1-5051-2926-7

Published in the United States by

TAN Books

PO Box 269

Gastonia, NC 28053

www.TANBooks.com

“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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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

CAN YOU BELIEVE, dear TAN reader, that the first work on the seven last words of Christ has never been put into the English language? On top of that, can you believe the work is by the Seraphic Doctor, Saint Bonaventure? Truly, it is hard for this publisher to imagine that such a work has been out of reach for most of us since the thirteenth century.

Little can be added by me to the extraordinary work of the translator and his note. Father Nixon is more than a translator: he is a herald of the great lost works. Nonetheless, I will add a few minor points of personal interest that I hope will resonate with you.

I remember the day during my undergraduate studies at Franciscan University when my favorite professor told me that while Saint Thomas Aquinas is honored with the title the *Angelic Doctor*, Saint Bonaventure was honored with the title the *Seraphic Doctor*. This one simple statement opened the world of Bonaventure to me, and my fascination with him has never waned.

These two titles deserve a short explanation. The distinction is not intended to be a ranking of Doctors according to the choirs of angels, the Seraphim being the first and the Angelic being the ninth. Rather, it is meant

to give emphasis to the particular theological traits of the two saints.

Aquinas is the Angelic Doctor because of his near angelic intellect, almost as if he enjoyed a minor beatific vision during this life. Correspondingly, his emphasis on the intellect's pursuit of God is palpable throughout his writings. In this vein, the Angelic Doctor sees the supreme name of God as existence itself, or "He Who Is."¹

Bonaventure, on the other hand, is said to have "*done his theology on his knees*" (a phrase worthy of our deepest attention), which reminds one of the Seraphim that are closest to the beatific vision. In other words, he emphasized love for God, intimacy with God, and the clarity of thought resulting therefrom. The Seraphic Doctor taught that it is not primarily the intellect that sought God but the will. And thus, the supreme name for God from this saint's standpoint was "The Good," which is the final end to which our wills are drawn.²

This work on the seven last words of Christ is in perfect keeping with the seraphic nature of Bonaventure's theology.³ The simple but penetrating reflections on the words

¹ ST I.13.11.

² To the philosophical-minded reader, it is worth noting that his emphasis on "The Good" may result in part from Bonaventure's reliance on the Neo-platonic tradition, whereas Aquinas relied more heavily on the logical order of Aristotle.

³ It is evident that Bonaventure saw something of his own style in

of Our Lord while hanging in agony on the cross are worthy of much contemplation.

Bonaventure's reflections display both his own dire need for intimacy with Our Lord on the cross and his pastoral encouragement to the reader. Each of his reflections are beautiful and instructive, neither aspect intruding upon the other.

In his mystical eye, Bonaventure sees the seven last words as "seven rich and verdant leaves springing forth upon a mystical vine [the cross]." In regard to the first leaf in which Christ asks His Father to forgive those who have condemned and tortured Him, hear how Bonaventure speaks to you, the reader: "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?"

One reason I love Bonaventure is that his humanity shines through his writings. His words are not a distant insight. Rather, he invites us into the simplicity of his own heart.

Arnold of Bonneval's writing and thus found it worthy to expound upon them. What greater compliment could Arnold receive?

A notable example of this is in his commentary on Christ's words "Woman, behold thy son" and "Behold, thy Mother":

I imagine Mary to have stood with her head covered, on account both of the immensity of her sorrow and her virginal modesty. How often she must have cried out as she wept, "Jesus, my Son! Who will grant me that I may die in place of You, my Son, or that I may now meet my own death with You?" How many times must she have raised her tear-filled eyes to His bleeding wounds, and again turned them away, overcome by sheer horror and grief? I marvel that she herself did not also succumb to death, so great were the waves of anguish which engulfed her!

Indeed, I can easily see Bonaventure using his imagination to plumb the depths of the Passion; I can easily see him marveling at the image granted him by grace.

Bonaventure was a lover, a poet, and an artist whose imagination brought him to the heights of insight. But more powerful than insight is intimacy. It is surprisingly rare to see a commentary by a Doctor of the Church that is so—I struggle to find the word—*personable*, and not just with the reader, but with Christ Himself. Just as he did with the Blessed Mother's position at the foot of the cross, imagining what was occurring in that Immaculate Heart, Bonaventure places himself in Christ's position on the cross, giving us additional words to accompany the few words that Christ spoke.

Something about this seems *personable* to me—something that only one who is close to Christ dares to do. Here is the example from the sixth leaf, “It is consummated”⁴:

It is as if He [Jesus] declares, “Now the words of Scripture are fulfilled. Now everything that was foreshadowed and prefigured in the ancient sacrifices is brought to perfection. For in My present sacrifice the meekness of the lamb, the strength of the bull, the obedience of the ox, the simplicity of the sheep, and the peace of the dove are all brought to perfection! The love which drew God into union with the human race in the mystery of My incarnation is consummated. The foundations of the Church are now completed. My own bitter sufferings have reached their end. The chalice of pain has been fully drained, and in its place the medicinal potion of eternal life has been prepared to full perfection. From this mystical potion mortal beings may drink deeply of the inebriating nectar of everlasting salvation and never-ending bliss. And my obedience to You, O Father, is likewise now consummated: for I have completely and unreservedly fulfilled all the decrees of Your immutable will!”

⁴ The translation “It is consummated” is from the Douay-Rheims. Other translations say something like “It is finished.” Bonaventure’s commentary on this word should give the reader a clear reason why the Douay translation is superior to others. It is one thing to *consummate* and another to merely *finish*.

Hopefully you can see from these few excerpts what is meant by the Seraphic Doctor doing theology on his knees. Hopefully you can see why the term “Seraphic” was given to this Doctor of the Church, a man whose only desire was to be close to God.

As I write this publisher’s note, I look up above my monitor and see a Latin quote from Saint Bonaventure hanging on my wall. When I first read it years ago, I typed it up, printed it, and hung it right before me to remind myself that the work of a Catholic publisher is not to educate my readers but to help them become saints. The quote perfectly embodies the spirit of Bonaventure, and I pray it will one day embody my own work for the Church. It reads, “Non enim potes noscere verba Pauli, nisi habeas spiritum Pauli” (You cannot know Paul’s words unless you have Paul’s spirit). It would be fitting for me to revise this to say, *You cannot know Bonaventure’s words unless you have Bonaventure’s spirit.*

The sacred passion of Christ, dear readers, is not a subject to be studied but a mystery to be lived. Invoke the intercession of the Seraphic Doctor, Saint Bonaventure, to help you do so. It is with humility and overwhelming joy that TAN makes this penetrating little work accessible to the world in English.

Conor Gallagher
CEO, TAN Books

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

“THE SEVEN LAST WORDS OF CHRIST” refer to the seven final pronouncements made by Our Lord upon the cross. These moving and profound words offer a beautiful synopsis and summation of the entire spiritual and moral teachings of Jesus. They also express with wonderful and succinct eloquence the principles which guided His life and mission.

According to Arnold of Bonneval, one of the earliest and most influential commentators on these words, “When Christ had reached the time of His passion, He recapitulated the whole essence of His teaching, saying with great succinctness things He had expounded at much greater length during His preaching. Thus it is that the last words of Christ offer a mystical compendium of the entire Gospel. These words are radiant with the splendor of the totality of the Christian faith. They are, indeed, like small seeds which, when sown in suitable soil, bring forth an immense and wonderful harvest for all the faithful.”

The Seven Last Words of Christ are as follows:⁵

⁵ A way to remember The Seven Last Words of Christ is using an acronym: FAWMTCE, or Father Always Wants My Thirst Consumed Forever.

1. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”
2. “Amen, I say to thee: today thou shalt be with Me in paradise.”
3. “Woman, behold thy son,” and, “Behold, thy Mother.”
4. “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”
5. “I thirst.”
6. “It is consummated.”
7. “Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit.”

The above form and order of these words gained general recognition amongst the faithful through the writings of Saint Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1221–1274) and has since become traditional. Prior to this, references to “Seven Last Words” were extremely rare and isolated—the only two known previous writings on the theme being a collection of commentaries by Arnold of Bonneval, and a prayer and very short commentary attributed (somewhat uncertainly) to Saint Bede the Venerable. The order of the lists of Arnold and Bede differ from that of Bonaventure and each other. The reason for this variability of order is the fact that the pronouncements are not to be found in any single Gospel, but are derived from a synthesis of the passion narratives of all four canonical Gospels.

The number seven is of special mystical importance, being traditionally regarded as representing completion or perfection, and in particular the perfection of God. Within Scripture, one encounters the seven days of Creation,⁶ the seven pairs of animals taken into the ark,⁷ the seven trumpets played to demolish the walls of Jericho,⁸ the seven angels who stand in the presence of God,⁹ the seven seals of the book of Revelation,¹⁰ and countless other examples. Within the Catholic spiritual tradition, there are the seven cardinal virtues, the seven corporal works of mercy, the seven deadly sins, the seven sacraments, the seven canonical hours, the seven sorrows (and seven joys) of Mary, etc.

Among the most inspiring and inspired writings of Saint Bonaventure is his beautiful meditative poem, *De Septem Verbis Domini in Cruce*, or “The Seven Words of the Lord on the Cross.” Saint Bonaventure’s writings were immensely popular and widely read, and it was this particular poem which popularized the Seven Last Words as a subject for meditation and devotion. Saint Bonaventure also features these Seven Last Words prominently in *Vitis Mystica*, “Mystical Vine,” a short collection of meditations in which he speaks of the seven outpourings of blood during the

⁶ See Genesis 1.

⁷ See Genesis 7:2.

⁸ See Joshua 6.

⁹ See Tobit 12:15.

¹⁰ See Revelation 5–8.

Lord's passion. In adopting the theme of the Seven Last Words, Bonaventure appears to have been directly inspired by Arnold of Bonneval's earlier work, the *Tractatus de Septem Verbis Domini in Cruce*, or "Tract on the Seven Words of Christ on the Cross."

This admiration was evidently shared by Bonaventure, who enriched Arnold's reflections on the Seven Last Words with his own inspirations and insights. Bonaventure served as the seventh minister-general of the Franciscan Order, and Cardinal Bishop of Albano. Like Saint Francis himself, Bonaventure (known as the Seraphic Doctor) had an ardent and intimate devotion to the suffering humanity of Jesus, and in particular to His most holy passion. His writings on this theme overflow with ebullient love and deeply touching emotion.

The present volume takes as its spiritual impetus Bonaventure's *De Septem Verbis Domini in Cruce*, which has not previously been available in any English translation. Included also is the aforementioned work that inspired the Seraphic Doctor, Arnold of Bonneval's *Tractatus de Septem Verbis Domini in Cruce*. Selected extracts from certain other writings of Bonaventure on the same theme are also presented here, including passages from his *Vitis Mystica*, *Officium de Passione Domini*, and his commentaries on the Gospels of John and Luke.

The treatments of the Seven Last Words in this volume each include:

- a meditation by Saint Bonaventure for each of the Seven Last Words, from his *De Septem Verbis Domini in Cruce*, and with some additional material also taken from his *Vitis Mystica*;
- a commentary, providing context and background and suggesting possible spiritual, moral, allegorical and mystical interpretations, taken from the writings of Arnold of Bonneval (for the first to fifth last words of Christ) or from Saint Bonaventure (for the sixth and seventh last words of Christ.)
- A prayer and hymn, by Saint Bonaventure (the prayer being taken from *De Septem Verbis Domini in Cruce*, and the hymn taken from *Officium de Passione Domini*.)

The commentaries for the first to the fifth words are from Arnold's *Tractatus de Septem Verbis Domini in Cruce*, which are more extensive than Saint Bonaventure's for those particular words. For the sixth and seventh words, Saint Bonaventure's commentaries, which are more detailed than Arnold's for those particular words, have been included. For those interested, Saint Bonaventure's commentaries on all of the words can be found in his exegetical works on the Gospels of John and Luke.

The Seven Last Words of Christ offer treasures for rich meditation and prayer, since they open up and encapsulate the mystical essence of His spiritual teaching, and reveal the fathomless depths of His love and mercy. Moreover, by endeavoring to make these words our own in some way (both in our thoughts and actions), we are able to unite ourselves powerfully to Christ's life-giving sacrifice and thereby share in the glory of His Resurrection. May each of these words resonate deeply and tenderly in our hearts, minds and souls, drawing us into the deepest union with Jesus Christ, Our Lord, Savior, and God.

A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF SAINT BONVAVENTURE AND ARNOLD OF BONNEVAL

IN AD 1221, one of the Church's greatest saints was born in Bagnorea, Italy. His baptismal name was John, but we know him by his religious name, Saint Bonaventure, which means "Good Things to Come." He was born only four years before his friend, Saint Thomas Aquinas, the "Angelic Doctor," another one of the Church's greatest saints. As a young child, Saint Bonaventure was healed from a dangerous illness through the intercession of Saint Francis of Assisi. At the age of twenty-two, he entered the Order of Friars Minor, following in the footsteps of Saint Francis. Bonaventure excelled in all his studies, including Latin, philosophy, theology, and rhetoric. He laboriously copied the entire Scriptures with his own hand, not once only, but twice, and thereby committed virtually all of it to his capacious memory. In 1257, he was elected as the seventh Minister General for the order, and later he was elected Cardinal-Bishop of Albano. Because of his writings, life, and teachings, he is referred to as the "Seraphic Doctor," for he sought to love Christ as the Seraphim do. He died

on July 15, 1274. Today the Church celebrates this Doctor of the Church's feast day on July 15.

In 1156, Arnold of Bonneval was born in France. He became a monk at a Benedictine monastery in the diocese of Chartreuse, France, and was elected abbot there in due course. He was a beloved friend, biographer, and correspondent of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, who esteemed his writings very highly.¹¹

¹¹ The writings of Arnold of Bonneval include several other numerically organized sets of meditations, including *The Six Days of Creation*, *The Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit*, and *The Twelve Cardinal Words of Christ*.

ARNOLD'S PREFACE¹²

CHRIST OFFERED HIS seven pronouncements upon the cross [His "Seven Last Words"] as His final teaching and example to His disciples, to be deeply pondered by all those who desire to be heirs of His new covenant. These last words have already been discussed in various, dispersed places by a number of illustrious commentators on the Gospels. Nevertheless, reverence for these most holy of utterances now moves me to attempt to penetrate more deeply into their hidden meanings. I shall attempt to discern which aspects of these were fulfilled at the time, which were uttered prophetically, and how they continue to speak to us all now.

When Christ had reached the time of His passion, He recapitulated the whole essence of His teaching, saying with great succinctness things He had expounded at much greater length and detail during His preaching ministry. Thus it is that the last words of Christ offer a mystical compendium of the entire Gospel. These words are radiant with the splendor of the totality of the Christian faith. They are, indeed, like small seeds which, when sown in suitable soil, bring forth an immense and wonderful harvest for all the faithful.

¹² This section is taken from Arnold of Bonneval's *Tractatus de Septem Verbis Domini in Cruce*.

But, insofar as they are such a brief and concise expression of these holy truths, so much more must our meditation upon them be diligent and penetrating. Just as they are seeds which have the power to bring forth a crop which is more abundant and more fertile than any other, so must our pondering of them be deeper and more intent. For only thus will we be able to receive fully their wonderful and nourishing fruit.

It is out of these small hiding places of heavenly secrets, as out of a golden treasure-chest, that you may discover the luminous majesty of the divine wisdom. For the saving truth, which had hitherto concealed itself behind veils of mystery, shall soon emerge robed in all its beauty and radiance. And it will illuminate and enlighten your senses with the golden rays of divine revelations!

Thus in the spark, you'll see the living fire,
Ascending upwards, striving ever higher;
And in the drop of water you'll perceive
The untold vastness of the boundless seas.

And in the fallen leaf you'll surely see
The glory of the skyward-reaching tree;
And in each single word, received with awe,
The heart may hear complete the Gospel law.

But before we commence our journey of contemplation, let no one despair of the possibility of their own eternal salvation, and let none consider themselves to be irredeemably lost. For did not Christ promise paradise to the thief who died with Him on a cross on Calvary? Understand, O reader, the immense and invincible power of this word! Hear the lesson of salvation preached in this final and definitive sermon of Our Lord! For Christ did not merely pray to the Father for the forgiveness of one guilty man, but pledged to draw him with Himself that very day to the realm of celestial light, and to share with him the ineffable glory of His kingdom. And in making this marvelous pledge to the penitent thief, His promise of paradise extends to all who are genuinely repentant and who sincerely place their hopes in His power to save.

Such, indeed, is the very basis of our faith. It is proof that the reign of Christ is supreme and capable of all things, even when He was helplessly nailed to the blood-stained wood of the cross. The dignity and omnipotence of His empire was in no way diminished by the humility of His suffering flesh. Rather, it was only in the agony of the cross that His glory was most perfectly revealed. For it was upon that final fateful altar of sacrifice that the cunning and strength of the evil prince of this passing world was finally conquered. Thus it is that what appears weak and foolish

in the sight of all attains to eternal victory, through the sacrament of the incarnate Word.

Indeed, the Son of God, speaking in the person of the bearer of our sins, cried out to heaven in apparent despair and desolation, [saying, “My God, My God, why hast Thou abandoned Me?”]. Yet these words do *not* show that the situation is hopeless for the sinner. Rather, they illustrate that it is only after sinking to the deepest depths that the most glorious salvation becomes possible. It reveals the wondrous exchange of utter abjection for the highest sublimity, which was achieved in the Person of Jesus Himself. For it was He who did not cling to His equality with God, but emptied Himself to accept the form of a slave; and yet it was also He who was given the name which was higher and more exalted than all other names.¹³

Of course, Jesus was never truly abandoned by God, even for a single moment! Yet His words at that time express the truth that a human soul cannot come to glory unless it is ready to undergo the experience of desolation, and to suffer and to die. For it is only by this means that it can make the narrow and difficult transit to the starry shores of eternal glory. It is only by the painful casting off of the “old skin” of sin, together with its scars, stains, and disfigurements, that the beauty of the new human being can emerge from within.

¹³ See Philippians 2:6–9.

Thus it was also that Christ, who was Himself the very font of life, declared Himself to be afflicted by thirst as He lay upon the cross. It was thus that He implored forgiveness and pardon for those who crucified Him. It was thus that He gazed with infinite mercy and untold compassion upon His grieving Mother, and addressed to her words of infinite love. It was thus that, in the very throes of death, He declared that His triumph had been consummated, even as He passed as immortal victor to the loving embrace of His eternal Father.¹⁴

In the following pages, a chapter shall be dedicated to each of the seven last pronouncements of Christ upon the cross. Those who meditate upon these words with devotion and humility shall find in these seven short utterances the hidden seeds of the entire mystery of our religion. And the soul which applies itself to this most holy exercise is sure to reap a rich harvest of divine understanding.

Yet I confess myself to be entirely unworthy of this endeavor. For my eyes, which are tainted with sin and distraction, are not capable of gazing upon the pure light of God's truth. Nevertheless, I will seat myself confidently under the shadows of these divine secrets. Carefully refraining from attempting to pick those fruits which are forbidden to mortal touch, I will nevertheless dare to reach out my

¹⁴ Only the Douay-Rheims Bible translation uses the words *consummatum est*, or "It is consummated," for Christ's sixth word.

hands to the other trees in the garden of paradise.¹⁵ And in doing this, I strive both to taste for myself, and to share with others, something of the heavenly sweetness which lies concealed within.

¹⁵ This statement reflects Arnold's humility in dealing with Scripture and his recognition that many meanings which exceed human understanding may remain hidden within the text. By using the analogy of the fruit of a forbidden tree, Arnold calls to mind the forbidden Tree of the Knowledge of God and Evil in the book of Genesis.

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 re-arrangement 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 compendiously 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.

Let us remember that He was the Son of God, and true God Himself; He could have easily summoned countless legions of angels at His merest behest, armed with star-wrought swords and celestial fire, to rescue Him from the clutches of His foes or to lay His adversaries to waste. Yet He had taught that if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, offer to them the other, and that if anyone sues you for your cloak give them your tunic as well.²⁵

Christ put His own precepts into practice, and illustrated them in His actions. He is the head of the body, of which all the faithful are members; and it is fitting that the head should initiate what the body is to follow. And so He expresses His ardent desire (which He will later describe as a thirst) for the forgiveness for His enemies: “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.”



What is this You say, O Lord? You do not accuse, nor seek vindication. Rather You try to excuse Your killers, and explain the error of these wicked conspirators. The weight of punishment which is fittingly due to them, You humbly undertake to bear upon Your own shoulders on their behalf. You do not confront them with their crime, but rather You act as their advocate, suggesting that forgiveness is due to them for “they know not what they do.”

²⁵ See Matthew 5:39–40.

But how is this to be reconciled with a statement You had made some time before Your crucifixion? For You said: “If I had not come and spoken to them, then they should not be guilty of sin. . . . But now they have seen and they have hated, both Me and My Father.”²⁶ Indeed, these cruel hypocrites *had* seen and hated. They had heard all that was prophesied concerning You in the Old Testament by Moses, and all that was read aloud to them each Sabbath. You Yourself had spoken in the synagogues, offering clear commentaries on the Scriptures. In the presence of the whole assembly, You made manifest the prophetic meaning of the passage of Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me and He has anointed me. He has sent Me to bring the good news to the poor.”²⁷ You had openly declared that this oracle was fulfilled in Yourself, even as You spoke.

What place, then, was there for any claim of ignorance? How can it be believed that they “know not what they do”? How could they not understand and believe in You, when You had spoken in this unambiguous way? Moreover, all the people saw that You could read the Scriptures and interpret them with divine wisdom, despite the fact that You had received no human schooling. These things were by no means hidden or concealed; but on the contrary, all the

²⁶ John 15:22, 24.

²⁷ See Luke 4:18 and Isaiah 61:1.

people witnessed them and marveled at them. Out of Your own heavenly wisdom, You exhibited a miraculous knowledge, and easily confounded the scribes and the professional teachers of the law with Your erudition and insight.

And what place for doubt was there, when the entire populace had seen You make the blind see and the lame to walk? How could there be any shadow of uncertainty remaining when You had cleansed lepers of their affliction, proclaimed the good news to the poor, and even restored the dead to life?



Therefore it could only have been willful obstinacy of soul and a deliberate refusal to see and to understand which prevented them from believing. Such was the baleful fire of hatred which burned within their hearts that they would not recognize as manifestations of God's power, that is, all the good works and miracles of Christ. Yet they could scarcely deny them, since they were plainly visible to all. Rather, they sought to explain them as the workings of devils. They ascribed to Beelzebul the deeds of Jesus, and blasphemed the Holy Spirit by attributing its effects to demons.²⁸

Nevertheless, Christ says that such persons “know not what they do,” and hence supplicates to the Father for their

²⁸ See Matthew 12:24–32.

forgiveness. He seeks to excuse them on account of their blindness and error. And this request He makes is filled with deep significance, and was necessary according to God's salvific plan. For it reveals the intention of God to sow the seeds of salvation even in what appears to be the most barren of soil, and to supplant ignorance and error (however deeply rooted), in order that the glorious tree of hope may burst forth with its wonderful fruit, and a temple of living faith be established on firm foundations.

And we should not doubt that the authority of such a mediator, Christ, was sufficiently potent and efficacious to delete any weight of guilt. For in cases where the mind is genuinely and unconsciously ignorant or the heart is unintentionally darkened, there is no sin, but merely error; there is no culpability, but merely blindness.

But alas, such was not the case here! For the very Truth was clearly before them. Their eyes had seen, and their ears had heard.²⁹ Neither evidence nor reason were lacking to them. Yet they continued to prefer false vanities to eternal verities, clinging stubbornly to tyrannical lies while refusing the liberating truth. They would not accept the healing medicine which was graciously offered to them. They preferred to remain blind, so that they could continue to live in the old, evil manner to which they had grown accustomed. Evil had become comfortable for them. And for

²⁹ See 1 Corinthians 2:9.

them, the habit of evil had made it into a kind of necessity, which had then become a kind of willing compulsion or voluntary madness. Thus, when Jesus said that they “knew not what they did,” He spoke the truth. But their ignorance was of their own free choosing and evil will, and was therefore a culpable ignorance.

It was of this wicked and willful ignorance that the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “Seeing, they will not perceive; and hearing, they refusing to understand.”³⁰ These people scorned and abused the examples of justice and mercy which the Lord had shown them, and shunned the illuminating rays of truth which shone forth in all His words and deeds. Rejecting the light of grace and nature, they concealed themselves and their malice in the shadows and figures of the old law. Thus did they exemplify the oracle of the apostle Saint Paul, when he declared that “the letter of the law kills, but the Spirit gives life.”³¹

In clinging to the letter which kills in order to deny the life-giving Spirit, they revered Moses more than Christ. They esteemed the words of a prophet more highly than the incarnate Word of God Himself, blasphemously preferring the servant to the Lord and the disciple to the Master. This was the unforgivable blindness and ignorance which Jesus asked the Father to forgive.

³⁰ See Isaiah 6:9 and Matthew 13:14.

³¹ 2 Corinthians 3:6.



Why then, did He ask for them to be forgiven, if He knew that forgiveness was not possible for them? Why did He plea that they might be excused on account of their ignorance, when He knew that their ignorance was not of a nature which could mitigate their guilt? Indeed, Jesus knew that the Father had placed all things into His hands,³² and He enjoyed omnipotent dominion and authority over both heaven and earth.³³ Thus He Himself was able to forgive, and had no real need to ask. This is the key to understanding the mystical and hidden purpose of Christ's words here.

For Our Lord speaks here in the person of a supplicant, not of a judge, in order to exhibit perfectly the super-abundance of His love and the depths of His humility. He shows, moreover, that though He is the appointed judge over all humanity, He does not ever cease to be our merciful advocate. Paradoxically, the role of the administration of perfect judgment and of pleading for clemency are united in the one Person, and thus will never be in genuine conflict. His words at this point reveal this most mysterious and marvelous truth.

There can be no place for severity where the wounded Christ pleads for mercy with His own blood. But how

³² John 3:35.

³³ Matthew 28:18.

appallingly great was the weight of humanity's sin, that its redemption demanded such a high price!

In this act of reconciliation and redemption, “justice and peace embrace” and are united in an eternal, loving kiss.³⁴ And henceforth, they can never be separated. Our Liberator makes Himself into a secure bridge, across which we, who had hitherto been captives, are able to flee to safety and freedom, escaping from the power of sin and death. And the Monarch of all the universe has written the decree of our pardon in His own blood, thereby imparting to it invincible and incontestable authority. His own crucified body, displaying the glowing crimson emblem of the sacred wound in His heart, is held aloft like a flag. And it is continually before the eyes of the invisible Father, as an everlasting token and testament of our redemption. This invisible Father—who is God omnipotent, eternal, and transcendent—constantly gazes upon it with infinite love and tenderness.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who both bestows and offers testimony to our forgiveness, has left this forgiveness as an everlasting inheritance for ourselves and all generations. The root of our sin (which was the first transgression of Adam and Eve) has been cut out. And although sometimes new growths of wickedness may spring up from the moribund stump which remains (as indeed we know they

³⁴ See Psalm 84:10. Note that all Psalm numbers throughout this text reflect those of the traditional Douay-Rheims translation.

do, every day), they are continually removed and healed, without the need for a new sacrifice of propitiation.

This reconciling sacrifice of Christ pleads for our forgiveness. In it lies the healing of our wounds and the reparation of all we have lost. Yet it also is offered to us as an eloquent and instructive example. For just as Our Lord achieved our salvation by the outpouring of His own blood, so each of us may arrive at the glory of our heavenly homeland only by the shedding of some of *our* own blood, too. Just as Christ was crucified, so must our own sinful tendencies and worldly vices be crucified. Just as He gave forth His precious spirit, so must we be parted from our foolish vanities, and misguided and egotistical ambitions. Just as He sacrificed His self, so must we renounce our selfishness. When Jesus cried out, “Father, forgive them,” He summons us to imitate both His mercy, and to be united with Him, in our own small ways, in His redeeming sacrifice.



Nor should we neglect to contemplate the sacred form and potent magnitude of the cross itself. For its depth, breadth, and height all reveal to us secret mysteries.³⁵

³⁵ In the following commentary, Arnold shows how a consideration of the various dimensions of the cross (its depth, breadth, and height) each reveals an aspect of its mystical power.

Depth

The *depth* of the cross (that is to say, the manner in which it was deeply inserted into the earth, in order to stand erect) portrays the manner in which it penetrates the human heart. By this penetration, it lays bare the hidden thoughts and impulses which are concealed within. So deeply does it sink into our depths (if we but let it) that it reaches the point where the soul and the spirit are separated from each other.³⁶

If we let it, the cross of Christ hides itself in our heart and finds a resting place there. Its presence is able to sanctify all our thoughts and emotions, and to fortify our will and conscience. And not only this, but it becomes a powerful weapon, whereby the Leviathan which lurks within all of us—that is, the dark and venomous worm of sinful desire—can be transfixed and rendered innocuous.

And just as it happened when Moses, following the instructions of the Lord, cast a piece of wood into the water at Marah, the harsh acidity of those waters was transformed into sweetness, so too when the wood of the cross truly enters into our souls all of our bitterness is taken away.³⁷ Indeed, by the presence of the cross within our soul, our whole being is ennobled—

³⁶ See Ephesians 3:18.

³⁷ See Exodus 15:22–25.

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*.