



4

Approaching Death in the Company of Christ

a. **“Today you will be with me in Paradise.”»**

“One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise’.”

— Luke 23:39-43

That day, three men were crucified together at the gates of Jerusalem. Jesus was in the middle, and he died not long after this exchange of a few words with the man known to Christian devotion as the Good Thief. “Good” not because he was innocent – he himself acknowledged that he deserved to be condemned – but because he turned to the Lord at the last moment and addressed to him this prayer, moving in its simplicity and humility: *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”* This movement towards Jesus was enough for Christian piety to see in him, under the traditional name of St. Dismas, the “first canonized saint.”

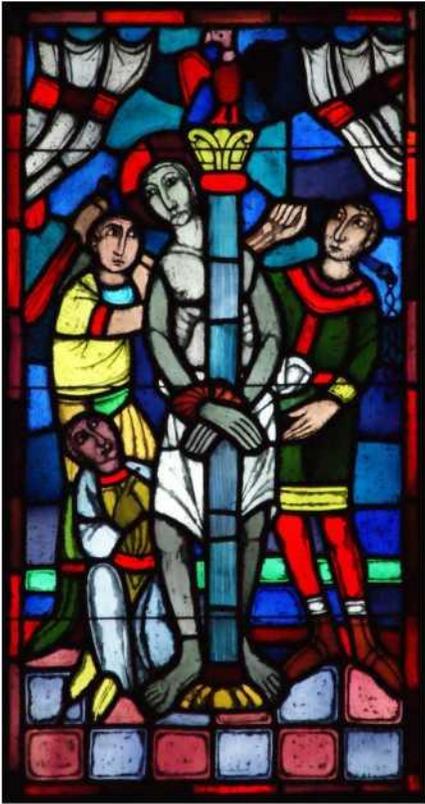
The Lord's words to the Good Thief were a promise that is not addressed to him alone. Every man and woman who approaches death, whatever his or her life-story, can turn in the final moments of earthly life to the Lord who is very near, just as the Good Thief did. This can mean a glance, a gesture towards the crucifix, or even just an intention, a simple movement of the soul. It is a prayer of abandonment and trust which we can get into the habit of making throughout our lives, every time we set eyes on the Cross. To pray with the Good Thief is the end-of-life prayer *par excellence*.

A lovely example has been given to us by the spiritual testament of Bishop Robert Lebel, former Bishop of Valleyfield, who died on May 25, 2015. He had signed this text seven years prior:

“I have been thinking about death for a long time. Since my retirement, I have thought of it every day in order to come to terms with it, for it is my future. I have asked the Lord that I might see it coming, when the moment arrives, so that I might welcome it in faith, hope, and ‘the fervour of the Spirit’. It is a mysterious gateway, and we never know how it will present itself and what it will demand in the way of suffering. But on the other side, the One who will welcome me in all the splendour of his love will appear to me. In fact, he is with me in my walk, but my contact with this Companion takes place in pure faith. I thank Him for giving me firmness and perseverance in this faith, through his Spirit, as well as for giving me perseverance in prayer.”¹



¹ Translated excerpt from the spiritual testament of Bishop Robert Lebel, as published in the *Bulletin de communication* of the Diocese of Valleyfield, vol. 4, no. 9 (May 2015), p. 2.



“Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they cast lots to divide his clothing.”

— Luke 23:32-34

b. “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

In 2010, the bishops of Québec chose to end their brief presented to the select committee of the National Assembly on “dying with dignity” by inviting all to contemplate the manner of Christ’s death: “*Still today,*” they concluded, “*many of us wish to walk in his footsteps*”:

“Every human life can be fruitful even if it seems useless or unproductive, even when we might be tempted to look away from it, as with the Suffering Servant in Isaiah: ‘he had no form or majesty that we should look at him... as one from whom others hide their faces.’²

“Isaiah was foretelling here the way in which Jesus himself would face his death. At a moment of abandonments and rifts, he marshalled his remaining strength to rebuild relationships: between his mother and John – ‘Here is your son, here is your mother’³; with the thief – ‘Today you will be with me in Paradise’⁴; with his tormentors - ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing’⁵; and finally, with his Father - ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit’⁶ In the midst of the final test, he remains the man of solidarities. Still today, many of us wish to walk in his footsteps, convinced that his example and his

² Isaiah 53:2-3.

³ John 19:26-27.

⁴ Luke 23:43.

⁵ Luke 23:34.

⁶ Luke 23:46.

message can contribute powerfully to the building up of a more human and fraternal society.”⁷

Jesus’ prayer for his tormentors as they were crucifying him remains one of the most sublime expressions of the love and forgiveness of God. We know how important forgiveness and reconciliation can be as death nears, and in the spiritual accompanying of the dying. In the prayer that he himself taught us, the *Our Father*, Jesus wanted us to repeat ceaselessly to God “*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*”. Is it not essential that everyone should be able, before they die, to untie every knot and bandage every wound in their relationships, drawing on the infinite mercy of God?



⁷ Translated excerpt from the *Mémoire des évêques catholiques du Québec* [Brief of the Catholic Bishops of Québec] presented to the National Assembly’s Select Committee on Dying with Dignity, p. 12. The brief was submitted on June 30, 2010 and presented to the Committee on September 30.



“Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.”

— John 19:25-27

b. “Here is your son...here is your mother.”

The last words of Jesus to his mother and to the beloved disciple are startling. Mary and the one whom tradition identifies as St. John the Apostle were at the very foot of the Cross, to be with Jesus as he was dying – but it was he who was concerned for them, and who spoke comforting words to them.

Even as he was suffering and dying, Jesus is the love of God made flesh right to the very end. Following his example, a person who is at the end of his or her life – even if weak and suffering – can still be a witness to and bearer of the love of God towards those who come to the bedside.

In his depiction of the judgment at the end of time, Jesus says *“I was sick and you took care of me”*. In faith, and by God’s grace, these words can be received by sick persons themselves as a true vocation to be, in their weakness and suffering, a real presence of Christ to others.

“If ever I should be afflicted by an incurable degenerative disease, or if ever an accident should leave me permanently broken and powerless; if I should come to a point where my body or perhaps even my mind are no longer under my control; if my day-to-day life should become nothing but dependency; I hope that this mysterious truth will uphold me in my trials: I can be the occasion of salvation for those who come across me by the side of their roads. Like the wheat ground into flour that, in the sacrament, becomes the Bread of Life, I can even become for them the real presence of Christ! Who knows but that this might be the most important thing I will have done with my life...”⁸

⁸ Translated excerpt from Bertrand Ouellet, “Présence réelle” [“Real presence”], appearing October 2004 in the “Signes de foi” column in the periodical *Vivre en Église*, published at the time by the Archdiocese of Montreal.

To receive and meditate on the Word of God:

a. “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”



What is the difference between the words of the two criminals crucified with Jesus? Why did Jesus respond as he did to the one we call the Good Thief? What model can we derive from this for the spiritual journey and prayer of persons at the end of their lives?

b. “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”



These words of Jesus are both prayer and forgiveness. What is the connection between the two? Is it possible to pray without forgiving, or to forgive without praying? What does this tell me about the spiritual steps to be taken as death approaches?

c. “Here is your son... here is your mother.”



In this touching scene, only Jesus speaks. Family and loved ones are a silent presence. If I am represented by the beloved disciple at the foot of the Cross, what is the Lord teaching me at this ultimate moment? What do his words “*Here is your mother*” mean for me?



To continue reflecting or to stimulate discussion:

- What touches me most about this step in the journey of reflection, entitled *Approaching Death in the Company of Christ*? Which passage from God's Word speaks to me most?
 - Can we say that Jesus, by dying, teaches us how to die? What does he teach us in each of these three passages from Scripture?
 - How can these three texts help us to accompany someone who is at the end of life?
 - To what witness and what actions are Christian communities called now that the State has made laws allowing euthanasia to be considered as an end-of-life option?
 - How can I prepare to envision and to live spiritually the eventual loss of my autonomy through old age and the approach of death?
 - What might be the role in the life and mission of the Church of weakened persons and of those losing their autonomy?
-

Legal Deposit – February 2016
Bibliothèque nationale du Québec
ISBN 978-2-89279-162-4 (Printed version)
ISBN 978-2-89279-163-1 (PDF)

The illustrations in this document are photographs of stained-glass windows by master glass artist Jan Tillemans, OMI (1915-1980) from the windows of Notre-Dame-du-Cap Basilica in the Cap-de-la-Madeleine section of the city of Trois-Rivières QC. The photographs were taken by Bertrand Ouellet between 2010 and 2015 and are used with his permission.

All Scripture quotations contained herein are from The New Revised Standard Version Bible: Catholic Edition (NRSV) Copyright © 1993 and 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?
My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”
These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.
Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God*

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

— Psalm 42:1-5

