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To Our Readers:

This very special edition of the HOUSETOPS commemorates the canonization of America's first male saint, Bishop John Nepomucene Neumann, C.S.S.R. At the same time, we wish to honor the illustrious Redemptorist Congregation to which he belonged.

In declaring with great simplicity our aim of converting this nation to the Catholic Faith, we are encouraged by the knowledge that our newest saint entertained the same hopes a whole century before our time. It is a matter of joy for us, therefore, to acknowledge our debt of gratitude to Saint John, and to many of his confreres in the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, for much of the strength we find in our American Catholic traditions.

And so, as Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, we congratulate and salute the entire spiritual family of Saint Alphonsus on this holy occasion.

Faithfully, in the Immaculate Heart of Mary,

Brother Francis, M.I.C.M.

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The SEVEN LAST WORDS

by Brother Michael, M.I.C.M.

Saint Thomas Aquinas once was asked from what books he had garnered his extraordinary theological wisdom. Pointing to a crucifix, the holy Doctor of the Church replied, "This is my book!"

We see in this beautiful example how the wisdom of the saints was acquired primarily through prayer and intense meditation on the life and death of Jesus Christ.

The season of Easter is a time when our minds and hearts especially recall the great mysteries of our redemption, when our eyes are beckoned to gaze lovingly on the crucifix, to consider Who it is Whose Image is thus pitifully portrayed, and why.

That we may better strive after the same holy wisdom which the saints shared, let us, then, go to Calvary. And there let us reflect on the Passion of Our Redeemer, the eternal Son of God become

man, suffering the horrible death of the Cross for our sins.

But we dare not approach alone. We must go with Mary, His Mother. For who better than She understood how great was the agony of Jesus? She holds the key to the treasure, wherein the great secrets of the mystery of the Passion are contained. So let us join Mary and walk with Her, following the bloody footsteps to the Cross, where we are to be taught from the mouth of the suffering Master Himself, by the seven last utterances Our Lord shall speak to us from His bed of wood.

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

At the top of the Mount of Skulls we see Him Whom our hearts desire. He is a mass of wounds from head to foot. "There is no beauty in Him, nor comeliness . . . and we

have thought Him as it were a leper." (Is. 53:2—4.) His executioners have stripped Him of His garments, and have violently thrown Him down on the Cross. They have fastened the divine Lamb with thick, blunt spikes to this coarse wooden altar of sacrifice, having so stretched His body to fit it that the muscles and ligaments of His limbs have been torn with horrible cruelty.

Yet throughout these torments and all the others that preceded them, Jesus never once has complained. Only sighs and quiet groans have passed His lips, betraying His excessive agony.

Now, with His compassionate eyes resting on the hateful mob below Him, Our Lord's first thought is to call upon His Father, begging mercy for His executioners. Raising His thorn-crowned head, He speaks: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Consider these words of Christ. He Who proceeded from the Father in eternity calls to the Lord in heaven. To draw attention and wrath away from the vile crowd below, wagging their heads in mockery, Jesus compels His Father to contemplate Him only, as if to say, "Look upon Me, O Father, and hear Me! Do not look upon the madness of Thy people, the Jews, for this raging mob has lost its reason!" Indeed, the Gospel confirms this, telling how the Jews, in plotting against Jesus, "were filled with madness." (Luke 6:11.) This is not to say, however, that they were not responsible for this greatest of all

sins. For as Christ Himself said: "If I had not come, and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin." (John 15:22.) And yet by our sins we too are guilty of the death of Jesus. And we too are, in a sense, mad when we sin, for only a fool would pass up eternal joy for a mere fleeting pleasure or fancy. What fools men are, for what do they gain by sin? Nothing. And what is lost? Everything!

Thus we see God the Son assuming His role as the eternal High Priest, offering Himself on the gibbet of the Cross to God the Father as the only acceptable reparation for the sins of mankind. And as our Mediator, with outstretched arms He begs us sinners to come to Him that we may possess His kingdom, where one day those same hands, now nailed to wood, joyfully will embrace all His repentant children. For this is His divine mission, as he declared to the confusion of His enemies: "I have not come to call the just, but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:32.)

Who can fathom the infinite mercy of God in hearing these sweet words of Our Lord, so filled with eagerness to receive even such wicked men as His murderers, if only they would repent? Jesus offers to heal those by whom He is being wounded. Dying on the Cross, He offers life to those at whose hands He is receiving death.

"Amen, amen, I say to thee, this day thou shalt be with Me in paradise."

Our Lord spoke through the

Psalmist, who prophesied this terrible scene at Calvary, saying: "All they that saw me have laughed me to scorn; they have spoken with the lips and wagged the head . . . for many dogs have encompassed me." Now it is being fulfilled. Everywhere Our Savior turns He is insulted, and is surrounded by angry dogs ready to devour Him. Up to this point even the two thieves sharing the same fate at His sides have reviled Him.

But now within the heart of one of the thieves called Dismas the good seed of Christ is taking root. Upon hearing the pathetic prayer of Jesus for forgiveness of His enemies, Dismas was cut to the heart. He turns to rebuke the other thief and humbly confesses both his own sin and the justness of his punishment. Then he turns his sorrowful eyes, now opened to the Light, to the torn and beaten Christ, Whom he addresses as "Lord." What a miracle of grace! Dismas now calls Him Lord Whom only moments before he had mocked as a fool. Listen to what he asks of his Lord: "Remember me when thou shalt come into thy kingdom." This penitent robber asks for nothing more than a remembrance. And well he does so, for Our Lord is more generous to those who are humble.

The good thief is a perfect example of complete conversion and true repentance. He rebukes the bad thief—and the Jews as well—for mocking the Savior, by pointing to the punishment which both robbers are receiving, as well as to the

avenging justice of God that awaits them if they do not repent: "Neither dost thou fear God, seeing thou art under the same condemnation?" (Luke 23:40.) Fear took hold of Dismas, and this was his first step to true repentance. Next he confessed his guilt and accepted his just punishment. Then he acknowledged the innocence of Christ. And lastly, he makes an act of faith, confessing the divinity of Jesus, by calling Him "Lord," and asking for a remembrance in His kingdom.

The first word of Our Redeemer from the Cross was a prayer for the grace of conversion. Now the first fruits of that prayer are borne in the good thief. And the second word of Jesus is forgiveness itself: "Amen, amen, I say to thee, this day thou shalt be with Me in paradise."

Marveling at this, Saint Augustine remarked: "His Cross was a school, where the Master taught the thief; the wood from which He hung was made the chair from which He taught."

If our eyes swell with tears upon hearing the parable of the Prodigal Son, then let our hearts weep still more at the conversion of Saint Dismas; for this is that parable come to life. Far more than a remembrance was awaiting this sorrowful sinner, since God always grants infinitely more than He is asked, if the request is made in good faith. "This day thou shalt be with Me in paradise"—the paradise of the saints called the Limbo of the Just, from whence he should enter into the Beatific Vision with Jesus on Ascension Thursday.

“Woman, behold thy son. Behold thy Mother.”

Not being able to hide its grief, even Nature began to mourn the approaching death of its Author; for the entire earth was plunged in a dismal and foreboding darkness by a mysterious and prolonged eclipse of the sun, symbolic of the death of the Son of God. In the awful stillness of this phenomenon, many who had come to Calvary were overcome with fear; and they in their blindness, fleeing from Him Who alone could be their refuge, walked back to the city hoping to find safety where only destruction awaited. As the crowd dispersed, some beating their breasts, Mary was able to approach the Cross with Saint John and the holy women.

Mary, the ever-faithful Mother of Jesus, after following His bloody path amidst blasphemous revelry, has at last arrived at the deathbed of Her Son. What could She do to comfort Him! How helpless you must feel, O sweet Mother of God! You who are the Queen of the Angels! Where are the angels now who once filled the air with the joyous sound of “Gloria,” announcing to the shepherds the birth of the Christ Child? Where are the Magi and their retinue of thousands who came to adore Him, offering gifts and kissing His infant head? Where is the bright shining star that marked His humble birthplace, when even the sun now hides in shame?

Yes, you knew the prophecies, O Mary! You knew He was to suffer before entering into His kingdom,

but how could you have known it would be so bitter? Indeed, suffering was not foreign to you, O Queen, for your past joys were always mixed with sorrow. But now has come the greatest of all your sorrows. Exhausted with grief as you gaze upon your dying son, you echo the words of Ruth: “Call me not *Noemi* (that is, *beautiful*) but call me *Mara* (that is, *bitter*), for the Almighty hath quite filled me with bitterness.”

With what anguish of soul did Jesus watch His dear Mother approach Him! She who had so tenderly wrapped Him in swaddling clothes has now come to wrap Him in a funeral shroud. She who with such sweet joy had laid Him in the manger has come to lay Him in His grave.

Jesus speaks his third word from the Cross to Her, tenderly addressing Her as “Woman,” lest the affectionate name “Mother” add more to Her grief. But Our Lord does so also that the Jews may know that She is the “Woman” of whom the prophets rave. In Genesis we read of the war between the children of Mary and the devil, which God declared when He cursed the serpent: “I will put enmities between thee and the woman, between thy seed and her seed; she shall crush thy head and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel.” (Gen. 3:15.) Again Jeremias in prophetic vision of the Incarnation exclaimed: “A woman shall compass a man.” (Jer. 31:22.) And later Saint John in recording his visions will refer to Her in this way: “I saw a woman

clothed with the sun!” (Apoc. 12:1.) All that is most admirable in a woman was found in Mary, for both the honor of motherhood and the glory of virginity belong to Her. So it is with awe-inspiring reverence that She is referred to simply as “Woman.”

“Woman, behold thy son.” Every faithful son provides for his parents. And none was more faithful than Jesus, who humbly served Our Lady and Saint Joseph for thirty years. He would not now leave His sorrowful Mother unprovided for, but instead gave to Her another son, a spiritual one, the Apostle John. Did this not seem a sad exchange for Mary—the son of Zebedee for the Son of God? Yet could it not be said of the beloved Apostle that he was now another Jesus? For having been ordained a priest at the Last Supper, Saint John would now take the place of Christ at the altar, and would continue daily to bring to Mary Her true Son in Holy Communion.

But our crucified Lord bequeathed from the Cross an even greater legacy to the Blessed Virgin. Speaking to Saint John, and through him to all men of good will, Jesus added: “Behold thy Mother!” That is to say, “Whereas in keeping My commandments and obeying My Church, and especially by receiving Me in Holy Communion, you become like unto Me, a son of God, so also do you become a child of the Mother of God. To Her, My spotless, most perfect, most beloved creature, I give My children. To you, My faithful children, I give My

Mother, whom I so love that I can never refuse any soul for whom She prays. And so perfect and loving a Mother is She that She can never refuse to pray for any soul who asks for Her help.”

“I thirst.”

The prophet Isaias foretold: “He shall be dumb as a lamb before His shearer, and He shall not open His mouth.” (Is. 53:7.) Since His betrayal into the hands of His enemies the night before, Our Lord has been brutally beaten without rest; He has been scourged, crowned with thorns, made to carry His heavy Cross, and crucified. And still He has not once offered the slightest complaint. But now He meekly sighs His fourth utterance: “I thirst.”

To be sure, this is a human thirst—one which always afflicts a victim of crucifixion. Pain itself is said to cause a thirst corresponding to its intensity, and for the crucified, that thirst is compounded due to the unnatural position of the victim. The veins are so stretched as to become tense, and blood cannot force its way to the brain, causing the head to burn with intolerable fever. This thirst is said to be the most painful ordeal of crucifixion. Indeed, it must be so, for only when Our Lord experienced this craving did He finally cry out in agony. And let us remember that Jesus has had nothing to drink since the Paschal Supper the night before, and He has lost much blood already from His continually bleeding wounds. Thus His dehydration is