



EUGENE DELACROIX -
A MORTALLY WOUNDED BRIGAND QUENCHES HIS THIRST

SAINTS, CRIMINALS, AND THE BLOOD

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St. Therese of Lisieux is renowned as a model of child-like innocence, so it may seem surprising that the first person to convert through her potent intercession, Henri Pranzini, was a criminal sentenced to death. St. Catherine of Siena likewise attended to three criminals sentenced to the same fate and by her fervent prayer obtained their conversion. One of these criminals, Niccolo di Toldo, she even accompanied up the execution scaffold, catching his head in her hands as it was cut from his body, rejoicing to see her white scapular spattered with his blood.

Why did Therese, the “Doctor of the Little Way” and light of purity and innocence, adopt as her first spiritual “child” a man whose sins were so great she could only mention them indirectly as “some horrible crimes”? And likewise, why did Catherine, the Seraphic virgin, take such an interest in criminals that she even rejoiced in di Toldo’s blood? Either of these accounts seems unlikely enough on its own, so why do we find virtually the same experience shared by these two *doctrices* of the Church?

SAINTS AND SINNERS

Besides their graphic nature, what makes us most uncomfortable about these accounts of conversion is the interest our two saints took in their respective criminals. They were absolutely devoted to these men and threw their entire selves into interceding for them. It is shocking, perhaps, to find that Therese is not the property of the pious, or that Catherine’s mystical prayer is not directed solely to spiritual doctrine. Their compassion no doubt arose primarily from divine charity, but I would like to focus on the other major source of their compassion: the recognition of their own sinfulness.

Although both of these women lived a devout life from their youth,

they did not see a chasm between themselves and their sinful spiritual children. Catherine regarded herself as “a miserable sinner.” In one of her visions, the Lord gave St. Mary Magdalene to Catherine as a sort of mother. Her confessor, Bl. Raymund of Capua, remarks that in response to this gift, Catherine could only say that “a sinner had been given as daughter to another who had also once been a sinner.” Catherine saw herself as a sinner on par with the Magdalene and for this reason accepted her as a mother.

Therese also made a similar comparison of herself to St. Mary Magdalene, but with her own characteristic boldness: “I know that without Him, I could have fallen as low as St. Mary Magdalene... but I also know that Jesus *has forgiven me more* than St. Mary Magdalene since He forgave me *in advance* by preventing me from falling.”

Although Therese recognizes that her sins were not as grave as those of the Magdalene, she does not believe this gives her some sort of privilege over the Magdalene or any other sinner (including Pranzini). To explain this, she uses the image of a physician and father. A child who trips and falls on a stone and is later healed by his physician-father will be grateful indeed. However, so too will a child who understands that the stone was removed from his path before he got there due to his father’s loving foresight. She explains: “Well, I am this child, the object of the foreseeing love of a Father who has not sent His Word to save the just, but sinners. He wants me to love Him because He has forgiven me not much but ALL.”

Therese recognizes that God gives his merciful grace in different ways. The grace that flows from our Lord’s death and resurrection has preserved her from great sins and has redeemed the greatest of sinners. Knowing that Christ died for both of them, she was prompted by grace to participate in the distribution of grace, offering her heart to soften Pranzini’s hardened heart.

COMPASSION IN THE BLOOD OF CHRIST

The blood flowing from the wounds of Christ brings these saints and sinners together. In the accounts given by both Catherine and Therese, the blood of Christ is central. Immediately following the execution of di Toldo, Catherine saw his soul departing and go-

ing into the wound in the side of Christ:

Oh how boundlessly sweet it was to see God's goodness! With what tenderness and love he awaited that soul when it had left its body—the eye of his mercy turned toward it—when it came to enter into his side bathed in its own blood, which found its worth in the blood of God's Son!

Catherine saw di Toldo being literally taken up into Christ's sufferings. It is from this same wound in the side of Christ that Catherine, in another of her visions, saw Our Lord draw out his own heart and place it within her chest. On another occasion, Our Lord invited her to drink from his side to her heart's content. As her confessor describes: "She did not need to be invited twice, and drank long from the rivers of life at their source in the holy side; and such sweetness ascended into her soul that she thought she must die of love."

Catherine finds herself at home with her brother, the repentant di Toldo, within the wound of Christ, the wound that has healed them both. The blood of Christ gives value to di Toldo's blood and is the nourishing source of Catherine's zeal.

In a similar way, Therese's compassion for Pranzini was grounded in the wounds of Christ. As she recalls, it was on Christmas of 1886 that she received the grace of a "complete conversion," when her father commented that this would be the last year she would receive presents in her shoes. At this revelation of childish loss, she says that Jesus accomplished in an instant what she was "unable to do in ten years" on her own (I doubt that discovering the fiction of Santa was such a decisive moment of conversion in any of our lives!).

One day shortly thereafter Therese was struck by an image of the blood dripping from the wounds of Christ, or rather, by the fact that his sacred blood was falling to the ground without anyone to catch it:

I was resolved to remain in spirit at the foot of the Cross and to receive the divine dew. I understood I was then to pour it out upon souls. The cry of Jesus on the Cross sounded con-

tinually in my heart: “*I thirst!*” ... As yet, it was not the souls of priests that attracted me, but those of *great sinners*; I *burned* with the desire to snatch them from the eternal flames.

The grace of conversion that Therese received on Christmas was given a definitive direction by this later insight about the blood of Christ. The following summer her own conversion would bear its first fruit in Pranzini’s conversion. When he mounted the scaffold to be executed, Pranzini seized a crucifix and kissed the sacred wounds three times. Therese remarks that not only was this the sign of the conversion for which she had begged, but it was also “a perfect replica of the grace Jesus had given me when He attracted me to pray for sinners.” Saint and sinner drink from the same source: the blood flowing from Christ’s wounds.

I THIRST

It shocks our sensibilities to see two women who are generally the subjects of pious iconography associated with criminal blood. However, they rejoiced in this connection because they both saw themselves as sinners, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb who was slain. Jesus, too, suffered the fate of a criminal, and as he hung thirsting on the cross, he too obtained the immediate conversion of the sinner who hung next to him. Likewise, Our Lord sought out the adulterous woman at the well to show her how much he thirsted for her soul. Therese and Catherine’s pursuit of souls is truly a sharing in the saving action of Jesus Christ. By imitating Christ, they manifest to us this sublime truth: our thirst for Jesus begins and ends with Jesus’ thirst for us.

Raymund Snyder entered the Order of Preachers in 2010.