

THE GOOD THIEF

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HE penitential season of Lent is with us again and we are drawing closer and closer to that wonderful week of weeks, *Major Hebdomada*, Holy Week. But the treasures concealed in the Passion of Our Divine Lord we must pass by for the time being, and omit contemplation of those precious wounds of His, each one of which, St. Francis tells us, teaches us so clearly what Our Lord suffered for us. Many other admirable features—the institution of the Most Holy Eucharist, the ordination of the first priests of the New Law—we shall pass by in order to consider the words and actions of a man who was canonized, we might say, by Our Lord Himself, and very early in the Christian era known as “The Good Thief.”

An extraordinary scene, we know, will attract attention anywhere, and whatever is noble and sublime will work a deep impression on man's inner self. The following account of St. Luke depicts such a scene and sets the stage for the interesting subject of this article. There were on the right and the left of the Saviour, two criminals crucified with Him. And one of these robbers who were hanged, blasphemed Him, saying: “If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us.” But the other answering, rebuked him saying: “Have you no fear of God, you who are condemned to the same punishment? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this man hath done no evil.” Then turning his head to Jesus, he added: “Lord, remember me when thou shalt come into thy kingdom.”¹

A short dialogue this, but what broad horizons it opens up! Two victims expiring side by side upon a cross, an extraordinary situation indeed! We must not forget that at the feet of Our Lord were the three persons whom He loved the most, His Blessed Virgin-Mother, Mary Magdalen, the heroic penitent, now His privileged friend, and John His beloved disciple. But while His enemies were pitilessly

¹ Luke, xxiii, 33, 39-43.

mocking and blaspheming Him, the Gospel does not mention a single word of consolation addressed to Jesus by His tender Mother, or by His loving worshipper or by His faithful disciple. Mary is mute, Magdalen's face is covered with tears of profoundest sorrow, and John seems dumfounded. All energy has left him and no words of encouragement or solace come to his lips. All seem to have been paralyzed by some thunderbolt of sorrow, and remain awe-struck and mute.

In Gethsemane's Garden when Our Lord was in His terrible agony and His soul was sad even unto death² God heard His plaint and sent Him an angel to comfort Him. But here, in this extraordinary silence of friends and in this apparent indifference of Heaven, when neither His Mother could console Him nor an angel speak to Him, it is a criminal who alone, and in the name of mankind, raises his voice. All the virtues which make saints, faith, hope, and charity, like a flame which makes a passage for itself through the hardest steel, entered the soul of this great sinner. Wonderful was the conversion of Mary Magdalen, wonderful that of Paul, but much more wonderful that of this thief. For Mary Magdalen had heard the words and witnessed the miracles of Christ; and Paul had been struck from Heaven by God Himself; but the thief next to the cross on which Christ was suffering the infamous and atrocious death of a criminal, was converted to Him by noble, sublime, and heroic acts of faith, hope, and love. While the cross of his incredulous and blaspheming companion will appear to us sorrowful and deserted for all time, his own, encircled by a heavenly aureole in our eyes, will be preserved and honored, and the impression of his noble and sublime prayer will never fade from our hearts and minds.

From the writings of the Fathers we learn that this penitent was commonly known as "The Good Thief." His proper name, along with that of his unrepentant companion, has been the subject of much dispute among authors. In some collected writings ascribed to Bede, the Good Thief is called *Matta* and the bad thief *Joca*. In *Historia Xaveriana* one is called *Vicimus* and the other *Justinus*. The Apocryphal Gospel of the Childhood calls them *Titus*, and *Dumachus*, and that of Nicodemus *Dimas* and *Gestas*.³ Legendary lore has given these two thieves the names of *Desmas* and *Gismas*, or *Dimas* and *Gesmas*.⁴ Benedict XIV gives the names *Dimas* and *Gestas*, and adds

² Mark, xiv, 34.

³ L. Ferraris, *Prompta Bibliotheca*, (Venetiis, 1782) Tom. 5, 142.

⁴ Msgr. E. Le Camus, *The Life of Christ*, translated by W. A. Hickey, priest of the diocese of Springfield (New York, 1908), III, 373.

that the cult of the Good Thief is found in both the Eastern and Western Church.⁵ On the 25th of March, he is given a memory in the Roman Martyrology: "At Jerusalem a commemoration of the Holy Thief, who, having confessed Christ on the Cross, merited the following answer to his prayer: 'this day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise.'" Cardinal Baronius in his *Notes* on this passage states that "the majority of writers call him *Dimas*, but since this name is taken from apocryphal works, it seems better to omit it here. However, numerous wayside shrines exist which were dedicated to the Good Thief *Dimas*, and many chapels were erected having this same name."

Many interesting legends and traditions surround the Good Thief, St. Dimas. We will give one of the best authenticated of these legends. St. Augustine tells us that when the Holy Family fled into Egypt soon after the birth of Our Lord, it came upon a band of robbers, two of whom were keeping watch. One of these was on the point of murdering and robbing the innocent travelers, but his companion stopped him. This second man was moved by the unusual splendor and beauty of the little Child Who looked at him so lovingly, that he went up to the beautiful Child and kissed Him with a rough sort of tenderness. His plea to leave Joseph, Mary and Our Lord go unmolested was heard, and the Holy Family continued its tiresome journey. Years later on Calvary, Christ recognized the man on His right as the robber who had saved Him and His Mother and foster Father from theft and murder, and when the good thief begged forgiveness, Christ was kind and merciful.

Petrus de Natalis in his history of the Good Thief, and James of Voragine in his sermons give us substantially the same account of this occurrence, adding that this thief in all probability was an Egyptian by birth and knew nothing of Christ, being ignorant of the Scriptures. Nearly all the early Fathers support this legend. St. Athanasius is related to have written some beautiful prayers to the Good Thief. We have tried very diligently, but unsuccessfully, to find a few of these old precious prayers that St. Athanasius composed. However, we did come across the following stanza and petition:

"O Disma Latro poenitens
Lectissime patrone,
Sis mihi Tutor moriens
Dum luctor in agone.

⁵ *De Servorum Dei Beatificatione et Beatorum Canonizatione*, lib. 4, cap. 12.

Sancta Disma, qui mira Dei providentia ex nefario Latrone in eximium poenitentiae speciem evasisti, et paucas intra horas aeterna tibi gaudia comparasti: aspice sublimi gloriae tuae Throno in hanc vallem miseriae. Recordare, O Sancte mirabilis, mentis humanae fragilitatis, ad malum semper, quam ad bonum magis proclivis; recordare, et pro nobis ad Deum appella, ut sicut per gratiam suam efficacem ad poenitentiam, et Paradisi coelestis Gloriam te perduxit, ita nos famulos suos, et famulas, eadem efficaci gratia ad dignos poenitentiae fructus impellat, ut peccata tecum abolentes, pie tibi commoriamur, ac una tandem in Deo salutari nostro perenniter exultemus. Amen."⁶

To stress the beauty of the Latin rhythm, we shall not attempt to translate the stanza, but we do add herewith a translation of the prayer: "Saint Dimas, who by God's wonderful providence wert converted from a wicked thief to be an eminent model of repentance, and in a few hours didst obtain eternal joy, look down upon us in this vale of misery. Remember, O admirable Saint, our frail human nature always prone to evil rather than to good; remember this, and ask God that, just as He by His efficacious grace brought you to repentance and the glory of Heaven's Paradise, so too may He by the same efficacious grace move us, His servants, to bring forth fruits worthy of penance, that being freed from our sins, we may die a pious death and rejoice forever afterwards with you in God our Saviour. Amen."

A brief history of the punishment to which Dimas had been sentenced is interesting. We know from history that crucifixion was not a Jewish punishment in the beginning. It was practised first among the Assyrians, the Persians, and the Scythians; then in Egypt and in Carthage. The Greek and Roman civilization, in turn, adopted it and it soon became the ordinary punishment of slaves, *servile supplicium*. According to the law of Moses⁷, a criminal could be decapitated, strangled, burned or stoned. He was never attached to the cross until after death, and then it was to inflict ignominy upon his body. The ferocity of Alexander Jannaeus, who had caused eight hundred prisoners to be crucified, was cited as an abominable crime. But a century later, the Romans imported into Palestine this method of punishment in use in the other provinces of the empire against rebels and malefactors.

It is worthy of note that, while condemning Dimas to the most frightful of penalties, the Roman jurisdiction had allotted him that

⁶ F. Orilia, *Riflessioni Istoriche*, (Naples, 1714), 245.

⁷ Deut. xxi, 22, 23.

very one in which he would be able to retain the longest his full liberty of mind and speech. For the cross is going to be the rostrum from which he will confess to the world at his last moment his belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ. Stoned or beheaded, he would have never saved his soul, as far as we can ascertain from his past life of wickedness.

With odious prevision, the Roman authority always kept a quantity of gibbets in reserve for the criminals. The terrible stake had to be neither too light nor too heavy, for the condemned had to carry or drag it himself. Pagan authors also attest that such was the custom.⁸

Besides it was necessary, according to the law, to have borne in front of the condemned, or attached to his back, written in large letters, his name and the reason of his condemnation. Suetonius says that the title indicating the reason of the punishment always preceded the criminal. The Jewish custom was to have the one who was to be stoned preceded by a crier who proclaimed his name, his crime, and the witnesses who had accused him. Soldiers, commanded by a centurion, were ordered to proceed to the execution. The gloomy train on this day took the most direct road towards one of the city gates. In order to hasten matters, they omitted the procession in the streets and the mournful pomp usual on such occasions.

They reach the place appointed for the execution. The ancients were accustomed to execute their criminals by the side of their most frequent roads, and on the prominent points in the neighborhood.⁹ They sought in this way to inspire in the people a more lively horror of crime, by affording them a close view of its punishment.

The slight elevation of ground on which they halted was called Golgotha, or the Skull, the Head, probably because the form of the hillock—rocky, grayish, and void of vegetation—evoked the thought of a bare skull. In our modern languages Golgotha is more commonly called Calvary.

There were, we must add here, two ways of crucifying the condemned: they were attached to the fatal tree sometimes by ropes, sometimes by nails. Both were in use at the time. The cruel executioners preferred the second, and enormous nails were used to pierce the hands and feet of the condemned. Lucan speaks of a composite arrangement in which, while nailing the feet and the hands, they bound the body to the cross by ropes.

⁸ Plautus, *Miles Glor.* ii, 46: "Tibi erit eundum extra portam, patibulum cum habebis"; Plutarch, *De Sera Num. Vindict.*, s. 9 "each criminal bears his own gibbet."

⁹E. Le Camus, *The Life of Christ*, III, 365; Cicero, *In Verrem*, v, 66.

The actual nailing of the victim to the cross was performed on the ground, and it was accomplished with the aid of nails that fastened the hands and the feet. The condemned was stripped of his clothing and was compelled to stretch himself in a state of nudity on the gibbet. Besides its four branches, the cross had a small joist jutting out from the middle of the vertical and principal piece. Tertullian mentions this seat on which the body of the crucified found support. Otherwise the muscles of the hands would have had great difficulty in sustaining so heavy a weight. It is less certain that the feet of the crucified rested in the same way on some support. Gregory of Tours is the first perhaps to hold this, and many artists have followed his suggestion.

Then the awful moment came. Even the most sceptical were moved when the gibbet with its human load was raised from the ground and, slipping into the hole, held the malefactor suspended in the air. The same thing was done to the other thief, the one who was to prove obstinate until the end. Here they were—two wicked criminals, one on the right, the other on the left of the Just and Innocent One.

Insults after insults were heaped upon the crucified men. Jeers, sneers, ridicule, derision, scoffs, reproaches, calumnies followed in turn. Nothing was lacking in the terrible assault of the passing crowd, so justly likened by the prophet to untamed bulls and to roaring lions rushing on helpless and abandoned victims.

Of these two thieves, one, at least, joined his blasphemies to those of the multitude: "If thou be Christ," said he, "save thyself and us!" To these words which so well revealed the selfishness of a base soul, were added other insulting words. Our Lord, we know, made no reply. His heroic silence, it may be, as much as His prayer for His murderers, moved the heart of the other brigand. It is important to note that St. Matthew and St. Mark say that both robbers insulted Jesus.¹⁰ Perhaps after blaspheming together, one of them reflected, and the first two Evangelists forgot to note it. Perhaps again, grouping the scoffers in classes, they neglected to distinguish the moral disposition of the good thief, and turned their attention only to the sentiments of him who joined his invectives to those of the multitude. St. Augustine, however, in his third book on the *De Consensu Evangelistarum* reconciles them in this way: "Matthew and Mark simply

¹⁰ *Matt.* xxvii, 44: "The self same thing the thieves also that were crucified with Him reproached Him with"; *Mark*, xv, 32: "And they that were crucified with Him reviled Him."

used a manner of speech that occurs in Sacred Scripture very often, where the plural is used for the singular as we can see in the second Psalm, 'The kings of the earth stood up, and the princes met together, against the Lord',¹¹ which refer to Herod who was king and Pilate who was the prince." This opinion of Augustine is commonly followed by interpreters of the Scriptures. Learned Cardinal Lambertini holds the same, telling us expressly that it is much more probable that the Evangelist is speaking of one thief only, because, if the good thief himself had blasphemed, how could he rebuke the other?

This thief forgets his atrocious sufferings, and at the approach of the last struggle, with death so near, he shows not the slightest trace of fear. His great crimes do not seem to cause him any apprehension. And why? Because he has been considering nothing else than the all-powerful Redeemer who was hanging on the Cross, he was contemplating the source of eternal life and love. "Have you no fear of God, you who are condemned to the same punishment? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this man hath done no evil."¹² This was brave testimony to Jesus amid the many indignities heaped upon Him. In these words there was a sign of repentance and an act of homage paid to truth and innocence. Immediately the kind words he has just spoken kindle in his soul a spark of hope. It is not unusual for this sacred spark to live even in hearts blighted by the most violent passions, so long as there still reigns in them a breath of natural generosity. "Lord," he continued in a suppliant tone that softened the boldness of his prayer, "remember me when Thou shalt come into Thy kingdom." He is content with a remembrance, and criminal that he is, he hopes for it from Him who has prayed for His murderers.

Jesus answered him: "Amen, I say to thee, this day thou shalt be with Me in paradise."¹³ Yet a few hours and death closing the eyes

¹¹ Psalm ii, 2.

¹² Luke, xxiii, 40, 41.

¹³ The word paradise, which comes from a Persian word signifying *park*, passed into the Hebrew tongue (Eccl. ii, 5), and signifies a royal garden. The Septuagint employed it in Greek to designate the garden in which Adam was placed. The Rabbis named upper paradise heaven (II Cor. xii, 4) and simply paradise that part of Scheol or Hades in which dwelt the pious men in the bosom of Abraham (Luke xvi, 23). The place wherein the wicked were enclosed was named the Abyss, Gehenna, the Prison. It is Limbo or the habitation of the just that is spoken of here, for the thief is to enter there that evening, and we know according to St. Peter (I Epist. iii, 19) that Jesus' soul descended first into the temporary abode of the deceased just. The gates of heaven properly so-called, were not opened until the day of the Ascension to Jesus glorified and to humanity which accompanied Him.

of them both, shall hasten them on to that higher happiness which shall recompense the unalterable sanctity of the one and the newly-gained sanctity of the other. Thus Jesus on His Cross enters upon His office as Judge. He shows how far the divine mercy will go when called forth by repentance. In a moment, the robber is become a just man,¹⁴ and St. John Chrysostom says that this conversion was no less a wonder than the shaking of the rocks. "Pope Leo observes: 'Two thieves were crucified, one on His right hand, and one on His left, to set forth by the very appearance of the gibbet that separation of all men which shall take place in His hour of judgment. The faith of the believing thief expresses the figure of those to be saved, and the wickedness of the blasphemer gives us the form of those to be condemned.' St. Augustine says: 'The very cross, if thou mark it well, was a judgment-seat: for the judge being set in the midst, the one who believed was delivered, the other who mocked Him was condemned. Already He has signified what He shall do with the quick and the dead; some He will set on His right hand, others He will set on His left.' According to Hilary 'Two thieves are set, one upon His right and one upon His left, to show that all mankind is called to the sacrament of His Passion. But because of the cleavage between believers and unbelievers, the multitude is divided into right and left, those on the right being saved by the justification of faith.' And Bede says: 'The thieves crucified with Our Lord denote those who, believing in and confessing Christ, either endure the conflict of martyrdom or keep the institutes of stricter observance. But those who do the like for the sake of everlasting glory are denoted by the faith of the thief on the right; while others who do so for the sake of human applause copy the mind and behaviour of the one on the left.'"¹⁵

St. Vincent Ferrer asks why only one of the two thieves crucified with Christ was converted. And answers that some writers attribute this wonderful grace to the shadow of Our Lord's arm, which touched the thief on the right, and by God's power effected his conversion, just as when the shadow of St. Peter overshadowed the sick, they were delivered from their infirmities.¹⁶ Origen tells us that this thief

¹⁴ Father John B. Tabb in his poem "The Good Thief" says something very much like this in the last three inimitable lines:

"Was ever mortal penance brief
As mine? A moment of belief—
Turnkey of Heaven, beware—a thief."

¹⁵ *Summa Theologica*, IIIa, q. 46, a. 11.

¹⁶ Acts, v, 15.

was converted and believed because he reflected on the miracles which he heard were accomplished by the Innocent Victim on the Cross. Perhaps the change in the atmosphere, and the unusual darkness that had come upon them, also influenced him to make his act of faith in Our Crucified Saviour. According to St. Jerome, when the sun was no longer visible, and the earth was trembling, and the rocks were rent, and darkness had suddenly overshadowed all, he made his confession in the Kingship of Christ, and by his open profession of faith corrected and atoned for his wicked past. While St. Peter Damian informs us that our Blessed Mother, who stood beside the Cross of her Son on the right side where this thief was, offered her prayers for his sake, and he was converted. The Seraphic St. Bonaventure, however, attributes the conversion of the thief to his two powerful advocates, Jesus and Mary. Jesus asked His Father in heaven to forgive all who had reviled Him, for they did not know what they were doing; He also asked His dear Mother (He looked down at her, and she could see the question and plea in His eyes) to forgive the thief all the wrong he had done to her. And when both His Beloved Son and His Holy Mother, whom St. Bernard calls *Omnipotencia Supplex*, asked for this favor, God could not refuse. Another author whose name is not given states that Jesus wanted to repay the thief for the words of comfort and solace spoken on behalf of Himself and in the presence of His Mother, and therefore bestowed upon him the precious gift of faith.

The wonderful conversion of this thief also gives us another proof of Our Lord's Divinity. His enemies purposely crucified Him between two thieves, so as to increase the ignominy of His death; but their intentional insult turned to His honor and glory, and Jesus, while still hanging on the Cross, drew the hearts of men to acknowledge Him as their Lord and King. "This thief," says St. Chrysostom, "saw our Saviour in torments, but prayed to Him as if He were in glory. He saw Him stretched on His Cross, and prayed to Him as if He were seated on His throne in Heaven. He saw One condemned, and called Him Lord. He saw One crucified, and confessed Him to be a King. O wonderful conversion of a thief!" All in a moment Jesus turned the sinner, whose crimes had merited death, into a Saint! This conversion shows, indeed, the might of the divine grace of Our Lord. How could He have promised paradise to the penitent thief, had He not been God?

On this subject of the thief's wonderful conversion there are many other delightful passages written by the Fathers and Doctors

of the Church. St. Leo asks: "What exhortation persuaded him to the faith? What teaching instilled it? What teacher kindled it? He had not seen the miracles performed by Our Lord; the healing of the sick had ceased; the giving of sight to the blind, the recalling of the dead to life, and still he confesses to be Lord and King a man whom he sees suffering the same penalty and torture as himself. Hence came this gift, hence this faith received its answer." St. Cyril of Jerusalem inquires: "What virtue illuminated thee, O thief? Who taught thee to love contempt and that, when thou wast affixed to the cross? O light undying, lighting the darkness! Trust then, have confidence, not because thy deeds make thee worthy of it, but because the King Who gives thee the grace is with you." And St. Gregory makes the following statement: "He came to the cross a malefactor, a thief; he leaves it filled with grace, a good thief, saved on his cross." St. Cyril exclaims: "O wonderful, indescribable grace! Abraham, the man of faith, has not entered paradise yet, and the thief receives the promise of Christ! Moses and the Prophets are still waiting, and the unjust thief precedes them. . . . He has come at the eleventh hour, and is received before those who have suffered the heat of the long day!" St. Ambrose praises the faith and love of Dimas in these inspiring words: "Let him see His gaping wounds, let him look at his blood gushing out—he still believes Him to be God Whom he knew not to be a criminal, he confesses Him to be righteous whom he knew not as a sinner. . . . He understood that for the sins of others Christ bore these wounds. He knew that those wounds on the body of Christ were not the wounds of Christ, but of the thief, and he therefore began to love Him more when, on the Body of Christ, he had recognized his own wounds." And again, "Great and wonderful, indeed, is that faith which believed that Christ Crucified was glorified rather than punished, for in this was the form of his whole salvation. He then recognized the Lord of Majesty, when he saw Him crucified with the patience of humility. He went before in devotion, who went before also in reward. For the thief came into paradise before the Apostles." St. Cyprian asks: "Have you given more to Stephen? Has your beloved John obtained a greater reward? Have the toils of Paul merited a greater prize? Have the labors of the Saints and the torments of so many years, the sufferings of the Martyrs, received more? In one hour, he receives a reward for which these worked all their life." St. Eusebius, however, gives us an answer that satisfies: "The Apostles lost hope even after seeing so many of Christ's miracles, but this man, the thief, does not yield to

the scandal of the Cross and Christ's death. He alone, though a companion in Christ's suffering, bears testimony to His Majesty: he sees the Invisible Lord before him with the eyes of an angel. He does not say: 'If Thou art God,' but 'because Thou art God, remember me,' . . . 'King of ages, when you come into your kingdom, remember me.' Again he exclaims: "O the depth of the riches of the mercy of God! Even to a robber He opens up the gates of paradise!"

We can get an inkling as to the greatness of the grace that Dimas received from St. Thomas:¹⁷ "The gift of grace that justifies an ungodly, impious person is greater than the gift of glory that beatifies the just man, for the gift of grace exceeds the worthiness of the ungodly, who is worthy of punishment, more than the gift of glory exceeds the worthiness of the just who by the fact of his justification is worthy of glory." And St. Bernard, in his sermon on the Passion of Our Lord, cries out in praise of this grace: "O wonderful benignity! He does not simply say that you will be in paradise, or with the angels, but 'thou shalt be *with Me*.' You will be filled with Him Whom you desire. You will see Him in glory, Whom you confess in His infirmity and ignominy. Nor does He put off what He promises, because He says expressly '*this day*,' to-day, 'thou shalt be with Me.' Our good and loving Lord Jesus hears prayer quickly, promises quickly, and gives quickly." . . . "He heard the prayer of the thief, and the soul of this confessor no longer a thief but His spouse He comforted by that wonderful answer: 'Amen, I say to you,' in truth I say to you, 'this day thou shalt be with Me in paradise.' You who confessed Me on the Cross of torments and ignominy will be with Me in the paradise of delights."

It is impossible for us to give the beautiful passages of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church describing the special theological and cardinal virtues exercised by the Good Thief on the Cross. There are ten chapters of Fr. Orilia's *Riflessioni Istoriche* devoted to this particular subject. In fact the entire third part of his book treats of it. Perhaps in a future article we shall present a translation of these interesting passages.

It is more than three years ago that the Holy Father instituted the Feast of Christ, King of Humanity, and we know that no King was ever more deserving of the finest loyalties of which the human heart is capable. He wants one law to govern all social relations and individual activity. He desires every thing to come under one rule,

¹⁷ Ia IIae, q. 113, a. 9.

the rule of Christ, King of Mankind. He wants Christ's spirit to sit in the councils of the nations, at the conference tables of employers and employees, in the legislative bodies of the various countries. The Holy Father bade us then, and he bids us to-day, to cooperate in making Christ's influence pervade the homes, the municipalities, the households of the nations and the entire human family. And being faithful and devoted children of Our Holy Father, surely we will do whatever is in our power to help "restore all things in Christ," the King of all men. The Good Thief is one of our models in this great work. From the cross he professed his faith in, and love of, Christ's Kingdom and Kingship. He was striving then to make its influence felt on Golgotha. He asked to be remembered when Christ came into His Kingdom. This, too, must be our daily work and our daily prayer. This is the end for which we should ever strive. Let us, then, with St. Thomas Aquinas, professing the same faith as Dimas, "make the same prayer as the repentant thief."¹⁸

¹⁸ *Adoro Te Devote*, 3rd stanza.

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