



To Convert A Thief

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The passion and death of Christ impressed those present as a most ignominious and revolting sight. Yet, the human tendency to forget suffering and remember pleasure, along with the eroding effect of hundreds of years have worn away the sharp edges of Christ's cross, and washed away his blood to make the crucifixion of the twentieth century an almost effeminate, polished decoration. In a like manner, the brevity of recorded detail, and the cloud of years have robbed modern man of the true force, and efficacy of the conversion of the Thief as he was crucified with Christ.

The Gospel record many of the noted conversions brought about by Christ, e.g., Matthew, the tax collector; Magdalene, the adulteress; Zachaeus, the chief of the publicans, etc. But the Fathers of the Church seem to hold the conversion of the Thief as one of the greatest of Christ's works. St. Thomas Aquinas, quoting St. John Chrysostom, speaks of the conversion of the Good Thief as a great miracle; "For to convert the Thief on the cross, and conduct him to paradise, was an achievement in no way inferior to that of splitting open the rocks" (*Summa Theo.* III, 46, 11, Ad. 1). And St. Peter Chrysologus goes so far as to compare the Thief's conversion to the

miraculous conversion of St. Paul; "I could scarcely believe it possible of you to be changed so easily from earthly lowliness to heavenly glory, if I did not find a consoling precedent in the sudden, and unexpected conversion of blessed Paul. There is too, that remarkable instance of the Thief, who stole paradise at the very time when he was hung upon the cross to pay the penalty of his brigandage" (*Sermon 61*). Compared to our calm, unconcerned view, why did these great masters hold the conversion of the Thief to be of such theological importance? The answer can only be found in the reality of the circumstances in which the conversion took place.

It is commonly understood that Christ's selection of the Thief was the choice of one from among the lowest segment of human society, an undesirable, a criminal, a prisoner. But even this does not adequately show the complete depth of human frailty, and social rejection, to which Christ turned for the last great act of His priesthood.

Prisons, like any other community, have an internal social structure rigorously observed. Behind bars, the status symbols are the serious crime, the lengthy sentence, the arresting agency, etc. Thus, the murderer, the lifer, the federal prisoner, are among the prison social elite. But the Thief, arrested by the local authorities, and usually given a relatively short sentence, is looked down upon in the prison community. In theology, the bank robber, the housebreaker, the armed bandit, and all who steal, are classed as thieves. In prison, however, this generalization is not acceptable. Among inmates, the thief is the lowliest of low. He is considered petty and weak, and too small to commit a big crime. He is the one who snatches a purse, or pilfers a poor box. He will steal a cigarette from his cellmate. Christ, having been arrested, and now dying as a prisoner, among prisoners, was well aware of this degraded position of the Thief next to Him.

According to most scriptural commentators, it seems that the Thief followed the usual pattern of prison behavior. He first attempts to be accepted by his fellow prisoners by joining with the crowd, and the other malefactor, in cursing Christ. As Pere LaGrange, O.P., points out, "The voices of the thieves could be heard blending with the jeers of the leaders of the crowd but far less wounding than these, for the thieves were ignorant, and merely took their share in the chorus of insults out of an ingrained habit of cursing and blasphem-

ing" (LaGrange, *Gospel of Jesus Christ*, vol. II). It was during this verbal assault that, as St. Augustine says: "The cross became a perfect school for the Thief, and by what a Master he was taught" (St. Augustine, *Sermon 234*, 2). The dignified silence of Christ made an impression upon the Thief. Prisoners spend many hours judging their fellow inmates, a habit that caused the Thief to take a second look at Christ. Thus, "To the practiced eye of the criminal, a short time was enough to recognize the holiness of his companion in misfortune, whose noble calmness and resignation he admired" (L. C. Filion, *Life of Christ*, vol. III). However, grace moved slowly, and the Thief's courage was first tested on his fellow convict. For rebuking the other thief, he says, "Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward for our deeds; but this man hath done nothing amiss" (Luke, 23-40, 41).

This confession may seem to many to have been an easy protestation to make. Far from it. Rarely will a prisoner be so honest with his fellow inmates especially about his own crime. The more petty the crime, the more truth becomes distorted and embellished. This confession of truth by the Thief was a tremendous outpouring of grace, flowing from the power of the theological virtues. "He had faith," St. Gregory says, "Who believed that God would reign whom he saw dying equally with himself. He had hope, who asked for an entrance into His Kingdom. He preserved charity also zealously in his death, who for his iniquity reprov'd his brother, and fellow thief; dying for a like crime to his own" (St. Gregory, *Morals 18*, C. 40). Grace now moves a step forward. The Thief having recognized the innocence of Christ, turns to him as to an understanding father; "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke, 23-42). We must note here an important step in the conversion of the Thief. It is he, the Thief, who turns to Christ, and not Christ to him. As St. Thomas says in the *Catena Aurea*: "Wickedness usurped the disciple of truth, truth did not change the disciple of wickedness" (Com. Luke, 23-42). Thus with his request, the Thief makes the ultimate effort expected of a prisoner. With his hands and feet fastened, with his freedom gone, he has only his heart and tongue with which to act. With these he breaks the irons of his confinement, and takes the threefold step toward true freedom. He con-

fesses his crime, tries to help his fellow inmate, and asks help of one qualified to help. The Thief can do no more. The Priest must now continue the work of conversion that was begun with His teachings in life.

Note here the striking contrast between the justice of man and the justice of God. It is a difference too often confused by those who stand judgment, for they expect men to possess the all knowing wisdom of God, and when punished, they fear that God, too, may judge from man's clouded view. However, we see here the Thief properly evaluate, and experience both judgments. For he confesses to Pilate, and is punished; he confesses to Christ, and is rewarded.

It is said by St. Matthew; "Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matt. 3-11). We see here the marvelous effect of this baptism, for St. Ambrose says; "This is the fire which removed the Thief's sin, for it is a consuming fire which said to him; 'This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise.' Thus did He heal those in whom He found a simple and pure confession, not evil, and not deceit" (*Let.* 57).

Christ now accepts the pastorate of a prison chaplain and gives hope in a most hopeless world of calloused despair; "This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23-43). To convert Matthew, Christ merely called; Magdalene was brought to Him, and Zachaeus learned the truth at dinner. But to convert a thief, Christ must leave the flock and go to him. He must risk the rejection of the world, He must experience the misunderstanding of association with sinners, for only then can He find the sheep that was lost. Thus in pain and torment, nailed to a cross, forsaken and dying, the Divine Priest gently and serenely answers the Thief, and leads him the last step remaining to salvation.

The conversion of the Thief was the culmination of Christ's public ministry. St. Thomas points out; "As every king who returns victorious carries in triumph the best of his spoils, so the Lord, having despoiled the devil of a portion of his plunder, carries it with Him into Paradise" (*Catena Aurea*, Luke, 23-42).

Last December LOOK magazine featured a story on Father Breitfeller and his apostolate. He is currently a chaplain for the penal institutions of Washington, D.C. and is heard every third Sunday on the local radio program, A Nation In Prison.