# THE (OTHER) GOOD THIEF

Cajetan Cuddy, O.P.

#### I. The Incident: 25 February 1954

Notified the pacing young man—at least, not yet. There was nothing distinctive about him. Nothing to set him apart from the other pedestrians moving through their lives via the busy French sidewalk. He had been pacing quite a while by this time. Back and forth in front of the moneychanger's shop. A moment's resolve, followed by a hardened look of determination. *Yes, he would do this.* He moved towards the shop door, but then stopped. Hesitation. Fear. He backed away from the entrance, then away from the shop. Ten minutes passed. He returned. The pacing resumed. Again, retreat. This time the pause was shorter. His resolution deepened. There was no going back. It didn't matter. He wanted this. He *needed* this. It was good that he do this.

He pushed through the door and into the building. And, as he would later describe it, tragedy ensued:

I entered the shop like a madman, eyes haggard, an evil air about me. I had to be liberated. Everything that had been planned in advance vanished from my mind; I moved like an automaton. I attacked the money-changer to no purpose... since the money wasn't there. I struck the man [with the butt of my revolver], and picked up a few bills lying nearby.

It was as he looked at the teller, bent over and holding his bleeding head, that Jacques realized he was no longer a man of mere desperation. No, he—Jacques Fesch, twenty-three years old, without any prior record of devious activity—was now officially a criminal.

The young assailant glanced down and saw that he too was wounded: striking the teller with the pistol had caused a round to be discharged from the barrel he was holding. Blood was dripping from his hand. Panic set it in. The old man called for help. The terror deepened. Jacques fled to the street and was greeted by a crowd of curious onlookers who stood in stunned silence around the bleeding assailant.

He began to run.

A small group pursued him. He dashed up one street, across another. A police officer shouted at him. Jacques spun around. A shot was fired and the officer fell to the ground. Dead. Screams erupted from the crowd. Someone attempted to lay hold of him. Another shot was fired. Another man fell. A survivalist's desperation now dictating his every action, Jacques made a mad dash in the direction of the Richelieu-Drouot metro station. Two more shots were fired, but they were both misses.

Jacques Fesch—the "tall and slender" young man with an "oval face and fine features"—was finally apprehended in the station. He was escorted to prison not for the crime he had intended to commit, but for something far worse. Far from a petty thief, Jacques Fesch was now a killer.

The most peculiar thing, jarring next to the graphic nature of the crime, was that the whole incident began because of a small boat. Jacques Fesch intended to rob the money-changer's office because he wanted a sailboat. A boat to escape his problems—to sail away to the tranquility of something he did not have, to a place where he did not live, to a time other than the present. His would be a boat to find happiness.

He was subjected to an extensive interrogation. The police were thorough and brutal. Following their violent inquiry, Fesch was escorted—bruised and bleeding—to the Paris Prison de la Santé. His first visitor was the facility chaplain: a "good and simple" Dominican friar named Père Devoyod, O.P. Although Fesch was drawn by the authentic warmth of the priest's smile, the prisoner promptly informed him that he had no faith and politely dismissed him. The chaplain graciously accommodated the young man's rejection. He was confident that they would have many further discussions in the days and weeks—and what turned into years—ahead.

## II. WHO WAS JACQUES FESCH?

Jacques Fesch was born on 6 April 1930. Both of his parents were of Belgian descent. "Spineless and cynical," his wealthy father "was autocratic by nature and made family life unbearable." Moreover, he took particular delight in suppressing the filial aspirations and interests of his son. Today such patterns of behavior would be titled "emotional abuse." Mrs. Fesch was a well-meaning but admittedly incompetent mother. Jacques had a "genuine affection" for her, but she was often awkward and less than maternal in her reception and reciprocation of affection. His early life was far from happy. A family acquaintance interviewed by the media after the crime categorized the situation as "just one more instance of the child paying for the sins of the adults." Indeed, for all practical purposes, "he relied on himself from his fourteenth year on."

Jacques Fesch was reared Catholic from the very beginning. And while the traditional Christian education he received at school did make a strong impression on the boy, the religious effects of such a formation were deliberately undermined by his father. Jacques became a professing atheist. He rebelled against studies and at eighteen gave up all formal education.

His father gave him a job working for his bank. Jacques had little interest in the world of finance, and he eventually fled to the military. *He fled*. Running from difficulties was a habit he formed early in life. Indeed, it was something he witnessed firsthand. His parents separated during the end of his military service.

He met a young woman, Pierrette, in Germany. It was a quick romance. They were engaged within a short period of time. And on the day of their wedding (5 June 1951), Pierrette was already pregnant with their daughter, Veronica. The three of themJacques, Pierrette, and Veronica—were now a family. However, marriage was not the solution to the troubles of Jacques Fesch. Even in spite of the usual bliss that accompanies the newlywed state, there was a certain ominousness looming over their heads. The stresses of life, work, finances, and domestic duties soon overtook them; Jacques and Pierrette separated when their new life as husband and wife had barely begun. Dejected, Jacques moved back into his mother's home. Pierrette and the baby and took up residence with her parents.

In an effort to distract himself from his familial failures, Jacques took an interest in business and proposed a new entrepreneurial endeavor. His mother, wishing to encourage her son's initiative, gave him a thousand francs toward the project. He promptly spent half of it on a car. As with all such purchases, the novelty faded and the foolishness of his expenditure quickly set in, along with the futility of his business idea. The despair which had plagued him for years consumed him with greater force.

"Longing to escape from all that made up his dismal life, he dreamed of setting sail for Polynesia in a small boat." This would be for him a last hope for deliverance—for salvation and freedom—from all of his woes. Filled with enthusiasm, he had plans drafted for a sailboat that would be worthy of such a voyage. There was only one difficulty: *He had no money*. The cost of the boat's construction would be two thousand francs; which was about two thousand francs more than Jacques Fesch—husband, father, and unemployed—could afford. This is what led him to the money-changer's shop. He needed funding. He needed escape. He needed happiness. He could think of nothing else. The boat and the blissful liberty it offered became his obsession.

After reviewing what he had done and without much deliberation, the jury concluded that Jacques Fesch deserved the final sentence: death via guillotine. Replaying the events in his mind a thousand times as he sat, alone, in a prison cell, he wrote, "a single refrain pounded through what was left of my brain: "*What have I done? What have I done?*"

#### III. A SINNER'S CONVERSION

A lthough Jacques was initially dismissive of the good and simple prison chaplain, the prisoner eventually came to welcome his company. Jacques continued to profess an absence of faith yet found the priest's daily visits to be a source of great consolation. He himself gives us a description of the Dominican friar and their interaction:

The chaplain too is a fine person, like all good, simple people. There is something lightsome about his face, and his smile would soften a stone. He has had much experience with prisoners, understands their suffering and knows how to touch their souls while attending to their physical needs.

Eventually Jacques began to welcome the priest; then, slowly, he began to welcome God. Over the weeks and months of the first year of his incarceration, Jacques found his resistance to God waning. Indeed, it was in the solitude of his prison cell that he began to experience the healing touch of Jesus. It was in the silence of maximum security that he heard the gentle whisper of the Savior's voice.

His conversion did not happen immediately. As in many movements of grace, God works gradually. "Jacques' journey toward the Light extended over a full year," and to someone in solitary confinement, that first year felt like an eternity. It was through reading a book about the Blessed Mother that he experienced the overt beginnings of an interior transformation. This encounter with Mary's grace occurred in October of 1954, "at the end of the eighth month of his detention." However, it was not until March of the following year that he experienced and recognized the movements of grace in the deepest sense. It was on that spring evening that he heard an interior voice calling him to repentance and saying something both consoling and terrifying: *"You will receive the graces you need to die."* Writing to a friend, he described it thus: Then, at the end of my first year in prison, a powerful wave of emotion swept over me, causing deep and brutal suffering. Within the space of a few hours I came into possession of faith, with absolute certitude. I believed, and could no longer understand how I had ever not believed. Grace had come to me. A great joy flooded my soul, and above all, a deep peace. In a few instants, everything had become clear. It was a very strong, sensible joy that I felt... Everything is lightsome now, but I still have so far to go!

It was in the silence and solitude of his prison cell that the criminal Jacques Fesch met the Savior Jesus Christ. This was purely a divine work. The grace of conversion is not something that the human heart can generate. Saint Thomas Aquinas expresses the grace of conversion—of turning from the darkness to the light—with clarity and eloquence: "That they are turned to God can only spring from God's having turned them... it is clear that man cannot prepare himself to receive the light of grace except by the gratuitous help of God moving him inwardly" (*STh* I-II, q. 109, a. 6). Man does not prepare himself for grace. This only occurs through "the help of God moving him, and drawing him to Himself" (*STh* I-II, q. 109, a. 6, ad 4).

Jacques Fesch recorded that "an immense grief and an immense joy" swept over his soul simultaneously; and for the first time in his life he "wept tears of joy, knowing with certitude that God has forgiven me and that now Christ lives in me through my sufferings and my love." Divine love was drawing him *suaviter et fortiter*. This was radically different from anything he had ever encountered. The grace of conversion was given to Jacques Fesch—as it is to anyone—as a pure gift. "By grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God" (Eph 2:8). Jacques reflected on this with great fervor and frequency. He was captivated by the all-powerful love of Christ. With theological depth and insight that only comes from those who have received tremendous graces, Jacques remarks, "it is not I who love Jesus, it is Jesus who loves me."

The emphasis of this statement is consistent with the teachings of Saint Thomas. In the first part of the *Summa Theologiae* (*STh* I, q. 20, a. 2), the Angelic Doctor explains that God loves all things, but not as we do. Our love is an elicited love that comes about as a response to the preexisting goodness in things we encounter.



Michelangelo Buonarroti - The Crucifixion of Christ and the Two Thieves

God's love is not like this. It is not a *response* to goodness. Rather, God's love is the *cause* of the goodness in things. Our love is responsive; his love is creative. God's love for us is not grounded in our goodness, but in his. God loves us not because of any goodness we posses, but because he is goodness itself.

Jacques Fesch illustrates that this insight is anything but an ethereal and irrelevant exercise in theological hairsplitting. Quite the contrary, no other doctrine is more consoling. The reason for this is simple: the truth

of God's love cuts through the devil's blackmail. Personal sin, especially of a repeated or habitual nature, tempts the sinner to resign under the apparent hopelessness of his situation, and to rescind personal trust in the infinite mercy of God and the healing power of his grace. Such blackmail is an occasion for despair, the deadliest of all the sins. It is a sin against the theological virtue of hope. Saint Thomas explains, "despair consists in a man ceasing to

hope for a share of God's goodness... when hope is given up, men rush headlong into sin, and are drawn away from good works" (*STh* II-II, q. 20, a. 3).

The fatal tragedy of this vice is rooted in its opposition to the truth of reality: God has forgiven sin and it is through hope that the sinner is brought into contact with a truly merciful Savior—a God whose unwavering love is not contingent upon any oscillating sanctity in us; a God whose love rests in his own eternal, unchanging, and infinite goodness. God loves us because he is good, not because we are good. And thus even when we are not good God still loves us and draws us to himself.

This is the gospel—the good news. This is the truth of the cross. This is why Jesus became man, suffered and died, and rose again. And this is why Jacques Fesch could proclaim, "there is no peace, no salvation to be hoped for outside of Christ crucified! Happy the one who understands this. And the love of God consists in this, that He 'has first loved us' and that once more He will be the first to lead us to face the reality of our life." Admittedly, this reality appeared grim at times. But the transformative power of God's love and mercy afforded him a genuine peace, a true happiness. "What shall be given me is out of all proportion to what is being taken away, and even if I could, I wouldn't change my fate."

### IV. The Cross and the Cell

Father Devoyod, the chaplain, was a constant source of encouragement for Jacques Fesch during this period of everdeepening conversion. In addition to saying Mass and hearing his confession as often as the guards permitted, it was also his habit to loan the prisoner books—the Bible and the lives of the saints. Jacques drew strength from the example of the saints, and in one particular letter indicated with eager anticipation that he was about to receive a biography of Saint Dominic.

Jacques described this period of grace as something that was "overturning my life and marking it indelibly." He recognized that "conversion engenders a new outlook," and wrote, "religion is not a matter of consolation but will always, in some sense, involve conversion." Although he struggled with loneliness, he took recourse to the presence of God. "God is here. In Him I have the strength to see and do whatever I must, so as to be conformed to His image. He unites my prayer to His will. The vocation He gives me arouses a prayer within me which I address to Him."

The grace of being conformed to the divine image is a radical thing. He understood that its transformative influence penetrates to the root of the person. It affects all aspects of life, reaching even the darkest corners and places, extending even to something as remote and as dark as a prison cell. Grace is not a spiritual cosmetic. It changes people. It makes them new. "Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17).

Although the routine of prison life was inflexible, Jacques found it possible to incorporate something analogous to the monastic *horarium* into his day, generally following the schedule of prayers and spiritual reading to which a monk in a monastery would be accustomed. This is indicated in his letters to a friend—a young Benedictine monk named Brother (later Father) Thomas:

Each morning I read my Mass at the hour when you told me that you assist at it, and once a week... the chaplain celebrates Mass in a separate cell. I attend it all alone, since I am under maximum security. During the day I read or write. The chaplain often lends me books... I try very awkwardly to talk with God as often as possible, thinking about what I have read, or praying to Him... When evening comes, at seven o'clock, plunged in darkness, I end my day by reciting "Sunday Compline," which you too must surely be reciting at that time. You see, I'm feeling my way, trying to live as far as possible in union with Christ...

This strikes an outside observer as nothing short of extraordinary—grace transforming the cell of a killer in prison

into the cell of a monk in a monastery. Jacques found it to be the most natural thing in the world: "Between a monk and a prisoner who is a believing, practicing Christian, there is only a difference in name." The loneliness was real. However, it was in the loneliness that he found God. The silence of the cell enabled him to hear the voice of God with clarity, "to encounter Christ, whose voice falls clearer perhaps in the solitude of a cell than elsewhere."

It was in this silence that Jacques came face to face with the "great mystery" of Christ crucified: "Only recently have I come to understand the meaning of the cross. It is both prodigious and atrocious. Prodigious because it gives life, and atrocious because, if we do not crucify ourselves, all life is lost to us." It was during this period of his life that Jacques Fesch began to compare himself explicitly with Saint Dismas—the Good Thief crucified atop Calvary with Our Lord. The Good Thief encountered the Source of all Life on the road to death and asked him to do one simple thing: "*Remember me when you come into your kingdom*" (Lk 23:42). The Good Thief experienced a love so profound, that even the most ignominious of deaths—death on a cross—became the most resplendent of entrances into the beatitude of Heaven.

Indeed, the Dominican theologian and cardinal Thomas de Vio Cajetan observes that the Good Thief received a singular grace: he is the first person in the Gospels to receive remission *both* from guilt (*culpa*) and from all punishment (*poena*). "*Today* you will be with me in paradise." Again, this was a singular grace, and certainly not one upon which we can presume. However, the point is clear: the Good Thief shows us that it is never too late to receive God's forgiveness—as long as we turn to the living, loving, merciful Christ who is always present to us. This Jacques did. He was walking to Heaven with Jesus:

At the last, in the light of faith, I accept the cross, which gradually becomes so light I scarcely feel it. I offer up my suffering, the injustices done to me. I love those who strike me, and I know that one day I shall hear these words, like the good thief on the cross. Amen I say to you, this day you will be with Me in paradise.

#### V. THE EXECUTION

On the evening of 30 September 1957, Jacques Fesch went to bed for the last time. It was his final night. He awoke before the sun rose and asked the guard for the time. "Three o'clock in the morning," was the reply.

He requested light: "I have to get ready at once."

He rose, made his bed, and opened his missal. This is how the Dominican chaplain found him when he arrived at his cell two hours later. "Jacques was very courageous. He was afraid that he wouldn't be able to 'sustain the shock' physically, so he did all that he could to see that everything would proceed as quickly as possible." He knelt down and made his final confession. His last communion followed absolution and was "very moving." Afterwards, the friar recalled that during their brief exchange Jacques's answers were calm, his peace profound. The priest faced him to offer comfort and reassurance as the executioners bound his hands. Jacques was silent. They led him to the scaffold.

Once he had mounted the structure, Jacques spoke these words: "The crucifix, Father, the crucifix," and kissed it repeatedly. These were his final words. *The crucifix, Father, the crucifix.* The priest raised the crucifix and gave Our Lord to the repentant thief. The priest extended the crucified Christ to him who was about to be executed. He brought Jesus from the Calvary hill to the Paris scaffold; from the company of the crucified thief whom Our Lord assured would be with Him that day in paradise, to the lips of the bound thief who that day covered the crucified Savior with his kisses. The friar handed on the same Lord he himself knew, loved, and contemplated (cf. *STh* II-II, q. 188, a. 7).

This, I submit, is the essence of what it means to be a Friar Preacher. It is difficult to imagine anything more pleasing to Our Holy Father, Saint Dominic. It is for men like this that Saint Dominic wept many tears late into the night. It is for men like this that he founded the Order of Friars Preachers. It is for men like this that he invites us to give up our lives.

Jacques Fesch was executed at 5:30am, 1 October 1957. Following the example of Our Lord, who refused to drink "the wine mingled with myrrh" (Mk 15:23), Jacques had "refused the traditional glass of rum and the cigarette offered to the condemned at the moment of their execution." "There was not the slightest note of rancor, or even of bitterness in his attitude." He had finally—after a lifetime of searching—found his peace. He had found the Savior. He had found "the wisest and best friend" (*STh* I-II, q. 108 a. 4). "He died a great Christian."

In a letter written on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception several months later, the "good and simple" Dominican chaplain wrote a letter to one of Jacques's friends recounting his final moments in this life. Summarizing the events he concluded: "This... is what Jacques was [a great Christian]... As he promised me on the eve of his execution, he is praying for us now. I am convinced of it."

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On 21 September 1987 the Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, opened a diocesan inquiry into the details surrounding Jacques Fesch's life and death; and in December of 1993 the cause for his beatification formally commenced.

Postscript: Jacques Fesch to the Sons of Saint Dominic

I would like to close this essay with one of the last things Jacques Fesch ever wrote. It is a letter to the chaplain thanking him for his prayers, kindness, and ministry. Although letters of this sort are generally very personal, there is a sense in which those of us who are fellow sons of Saint Dominic and brothers in the Order of Friars Preachers are also—albeit indirectly—recipients of this letter: Dear Father,

Here I am at the close of my life, my soul at peace and my heart steady. In a few hours a new and eternal dawn will break for me, if our Lord judges me worthy to be counted among His children. In these last moments I can hardly help reviewing all the scenes of my past life in the radiance of the new light that is mine as I stand on the threshold of life. They are not sad, because they have led up to the love of Jesus, thus taking on a meaning I never suspected. Some are even happy, and here I am thinking of those hours I spent at the foot of the improvised altar in a prison cell, or the time passed in reading the spiritual books your goodness knew how to choose for me—always the best!

I owe you my heartfelt thanks, Father, for your perseverance in my regard, for your kindness and the care you have always taken for my soul's welfare, nourishing it faithfully with its one need: our Lord Jesus Christ. I am trying to thank you at least in part here below, but although I may seem presumptuous in saying this, *I cannot hide from you the fact that it is from heaven, whence all blessings flow, that I should like to be able to thank you.* 

I shall carry your name to heaven with me, written in my heart, and when the Lord allows me to cast a glace down to earth, I shall gaze into a dark little cell where a priest is celebrating the greatest of all possible sacrifices, uniting himself each day to crucified Love, and then I shall ask Our Lord to cast a gracious glance on his faithful minister and fill him with blessings.

Peace be with you, my Father, and may the eternal light soon shine upon you also.

Until we meet in God,

Your humble and grateful sheep,

For those who have been called to the inestimable dignity of serving at the Lord's altar and are currently being formed according to the image of Saint Dominic, greater and more profound words of encouragement are difficult to conceive. These words, reminiscent of the final words of Our Holy Father ("I shall be more useful to you and more fruitful after my death than I was in my life"), can't help but stir the heart of the Friar Preacher. May he who has begun this good work in us bring it to completion (Phil 1:6).

No doubt St. Dominic himself smiled when Jacques Fesch wrote these words. May they, one day, be able to be written about us.

*Imple Pater quod dixisti, nos tuis iuvans precibus. O Beate Pater Dominice, ora pro nobis, nunc et semper! Amen.* 

This article draws from the narrative and letters of Jacques Fesch as found in Augustin-Michel Lemonnier, Light Over the Scaffold: Prison Letters of Jacques Fesch and Cell 18: Unedited Letters of Jacques Fesch (New York: Alba House, 1996).

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Cajetan Cuddy entered the Order of Preachers in 2009.