

Seven Words OF Jesus and Mary

LESSONS

from

CANA

and

CALVARY



FULTON J. SHEEN



Liguori

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Dedicated to
MARY QUEEN OF THE HOLY ROSARY

Gracious Patroness
of the United States
in humble petition
that through
thy immaculate heart
the world
may find its way back
to the sacred heart
of thy Divine Son



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CHAPTER ONE



The First Word: The Value of Ignorance

The Blessed Virgin Mary's First Word

How shall this be done, because I know not man?

Luke 1:34



Our Lord's First Word

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

Luke 23:34

One thousand years before Our Blessed Lord was born, there lived one of the greatest of all poets: the glorious Homer of the Greeks. Two great epics are ascribed to him: one the Iliad; the other, the Odyssey. The hero of the Iliad was not Achilles, but Hector, the leader of the enemy Trojans whom Achilles defeated and killed. The poem ends not with the glorification of Achilles but of the defeated Hector.

The other poem, the Odyssey, has as its hero, not Odysseus, but Penelope, his wife, who was faithful to him during the years of his travels. As the suitors pressed for her affections, she told them that when she finished weaving the garment they saw before her, she would listen to their courtship. But each night she unraveled what she had woven in the day, and thus remained faithful until her husband returned. "Of all women," she said, "I am the most sorrowful." Well might be applied to her the words of Shakespeare: "Sorrow sits in my soul as on a throne. Bid kings come and bow down to it."

For a thousand years before the birth of Our Blessed Lord, pagan antiquity resounded with these two stories of the poet who threw into the teeth of history the mysterious challenge of glorifying a defeated man and hailing a sorrowful woman. How, the subsequent centuries asked, could anyone be victorious in defeat and glorious in sorrow? And the answer was never given until that day when there came One who was glorious in defeat: the Christ on his cross and one who was magnificent in sorrow: his Blessed Mother beneath the cross.

It is interesting that Our Lord spoke seven times on Calvary and that his mother is recorded as having spoken but seven times in sacred Scripture. Her last recorded word was at the marriage feast of Cana, when her Divine Son began his public life. Now that the sun was out, there was no longer need of the moon to shine. Now that the Word has spoken, there was no longer need of words.

Saint Luke records five of the seven words which he could have known only from her. Saint John records the other two. One wonders, as Our Blessed Lord spoke each of his Seven Words, if Our Blessed Mother at the foot of the cross did not think of each of her corresponding words. Such will be the subject of our meditation: Our Lord's Seven Words on the Cross and the Seven Words of Mary's Life.

Men cannot stand weakness. Men are, in a certain sense, the weaker sex. There is nothing that so much unnerves a man as a woman's tears. Therefore men need the strength and the inspiration of women who do not break down in a crisis. They need someone not prostrate at the foot of the cross, but standing, as Mary stood. John was there; he saw her standing, and he wrote it down in his Gospel.

Generally when innocent men suffer at the hands of impious judges, their last words are either: "I am innocent" or "The courts are rotten." But here, for the first time in the hearing of the world, is one who asked neither for the forgiveness of his own sins, for he is God, nor proclaimed his own innocence, for men are not judges of God. Rather

does he plead for those who kill him: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34).

Mary beneath the gibbet heard her Divine Son speak that First Word. I wonder when she heard him say “know not” if she did not recall her own First Word. It, too, contained those words: “know not.”

The occasion was the Annunciation, the first good news to reach the earth in centuries. The angel announced to her that she was to become the Mother of God: “Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb and shalt bring forth a son: and thou shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great and shall be called the son of the Most High. And the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of David his father: and he shall reign in the house of Jacob forever. And of his Kingdom there shall be no end. And Mary said to the Angel: How shall this be done, because I know not man?” (Lk 1:31–34).

These words of Jesus and Mary seem to suggest that there is sometimes wisdom in not knowing. Ignorance is here represented not as a cure, but a blessing. This rather shocks our modern sensibilities which so much glorify education, but that is because we fail to distinguish between true wisdom and false wisdom. Saint Paul called the wisdom of the world “foolishness,” and Our Blessed Lord thanked his Heavenly Father that he had not revealed Heavenly Wisdom to the worldly wise.

The ignorance which is here extolled is not ignorance of the truth, but ignorance of evil. Notice it first of all in the word of Our Savior to his executioners: He implied

that they could be forgiven only because they were ignorant of their terrible crime. It was not their wisdom that would save them, but their ignorance.

If they knew what they were doing as they smote the hands of Everlasting Mercy, dug the feet of the Good Shepherd, crowned the head of Wisdom Incarnate, and still went on doing it, they would never have been saved.

They would have been damned! It was only their ignorance which brought them within the pale of redemption and forgiveness. As Saint Peter told them on Pentecost: "I know that you did it through ignorance: as did also your rulers" (Acts 3:17).

Why is it that you and I, for example, can sin a thousand times and be forgiven, and the angels who have sinned but once are eternally unforgiven. The reason is that the angels *knew* what they were doing. The angels see the consequences of each and every one of their decisions with the same clarity that you see that a part can never be greater than the whole. Once you make that judgment you can never take it back. It is irrevocable; it is eternal.

Now the angels saw the consequences of their choices with still greater clarity. Therefore, when they made a decision, they made it knowingly and there was no taking it back. They were lost forever. Tremendous are the responsibilities of knowing. Those who know the truth will be judged more severely than those who know it not. As Our Blessed Lord said: "If I had not come...they would not have sin" (Jn 15:22).