

Lenten Reflections 2018

The Seven Last Words of Jesus



The Seven Last Words of Jesus—Week 1: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

By Sister Sheila Carney

Meditation

Many years ago I had the opportunity to attend the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Sisters of Mercy in Australia. The version of the Lord’s Prayer chosen for the liturgy was from the Aboriginal tradition.

Instead of “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” they prayed, “Others have done wrong to us and we are sorry for them today.”

These words tell us how forgiveness works on us. When we are able to forgive, we not only put the past, with its hurts, behind us, but we also find compassion in the space where we had been holding on to our hurts. We extend loving forgiveness to another because “they know not what they do,” or because their regret touches our hearts, or because we don’t want to carry the burden of an unforgiving heart. Perhaps our readiness to forgive comes sooner than the readiness to ask for forgiveness, or the other way around. In either case, the words of Jesus on the cross—“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”—and the words of the Lord’s prayer call us to stretch out our hands to those who have hurt us and help them across the threshold of mercy, that door we have pledged to hold ajar.



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Reflection

On the day of her death, Catherine McAuley, founder of the Sisters of Mercy, also reached out in forgiveness. One of the visitors on that last day was Walter Meyler, a priest who had caused her suffering over the appointment of a chaplain. Mother Austin Carroll's description of their visit says that Catherine was "particularly affectionate with [Father Meyler] as if to show how completely she had forgiven the annoyance he once caused her" (*Life of Catherine McAuley*, p. 436).

"Annoyance" is, perhaps, a mild word in this case, as Catherine had written previously about her feelings to her friend, Mother Frances Warde: "Pray fervently to God to take all bitterness from me. I can scarcely think of what has been done to me without resentment. May God forgive me and make me humble before he calls me into his presence" (*The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1818-1841*, p.144). It is clear that Catherine's prayer was answered, for she showed her forgiveness of Father Meyler and demonstrated an ongoing trust by asking, "You will be a father to my poor children when I am no more? I know you will."

Invitation

"Others have done wrong to us, and we are sorry for them today." This is a mantra that I hope to carry with me through the days of Lent, encouraging me to look deeply into the eyes and hearts of those whose actions, words and/or opinions may feel hurtful or harmful. I do this not with the expectation of changing others, but with the hope that I myself may be changed. Just as Catherine prayed to be freed from bitterness, I pray that the jaggedness of hurt and resentment will be transformed into the soothing gift of compassion.

Art by Sister Genemarie Beegan