

**The Seven Last Words of Christ**  
Reflections by Fr. Paul S. Naumann, S.J.  
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**The FIRST**

‘A cold coming we had of it  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, . . .  
At the end we preferred to travel all night. . .  
Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,  
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;...  
And three trees on the low sky,....

That was the journey of the Magi and came toward the end of both their individual, particular journeys to Bethlehem to find the King of the Jews, and their life journeys.

The Magi arrived late in Bethlehem, even though they had a guiding star. For ourselves, we have to read the road and street signs: Washington Street, Delaware Avenue, Scajaquada Expressway. So also on our life journey -- at a crossroads we expect a sign: Wrong Way, Do Not Enter, No Left Turn, Dead End, No Exit.

For the Magi coming to the end of their journey, those three trees against the low horizon pick up Jesus at the very beginning of his. They will be his destination for the rest of his life. Jesus arrived at his journey's end going more and more slowly, taking one step, putting one painful foot ahead of the other, carefully balancing the frightful wood in the hope that it would not crash him onto the paving stones.

Many people become immobilized before they reach, not the termination of their journeys, but the final stage. Immobilized in hospital beds, tied down by I V units, oxygen respirators, monitors of heart beat and pulse, all the paraphernalia of death, the

universal exit. The executioner immobilized Jesus much more simply, with nails.

And so they raised him up between two thieves, above the heads of the spectators, the “three trees on the low sky.”

At a crossroads we expect a sign. Here, on Calvary, we are at the crossroads of the world, at the crossroads of history, and, just as we expected, we are given a sign: the Word of God made flesh, nailed to the cross. This is a sign we do not have to read, not yet, because the Word speaks: “Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.”

Them? “Father forgive *them*?” They? Who are *they*? The Chief Priests, the Scribes and Pharisees, the Sanhedrin? The Jewish people in general? “His blood be upon ourselves and on our children.” Is there a Christ-killer here, in this church?

Yes. I am.

Many years ago, when I was a Jesuit scholastic studying theology, I was living in an enormous, brick pile in the hinterlands of Boston. For the annual community retreat we all met, several times a day, in the auditorium under the chapel. I was a second year theologian when Fr. Ray Swords arrived to give the retreat. When, in the course of eight days, we came to the crucifixion, Fr. Swords gave an eloquent, and most graphic description. As he talked I began to get angry. He talked at considerable length and I got angrier and angrier, to such a degree that I could barely sit still and became afraid that I would rush from the auditorium.

When he had finished, instead of going to my room to pray, I went outside and walked around and around that huge, brick institution. I kept asking myself, *Why am I so angry? Why am I so angry?* I

knew it was not the length. I had sat quietly through long deliveries and many retreats before. Well, if you ask a question long enough, you may, eventually, get an answer. And so it happened. Light grew in my mind and stopped me in my steps and I said, "I am not responsible. No. Not for that. Not me. Never me."

One can deny an obvious truth for just so long. Especially when, like a great stone (or a cross) it is blocking the pathway in front of us. Christ died to rescue sinners. No sin, no crucifixion. I am a sinner. Were I the only sinner in history it would make no difference; the life-saver would be and do the same. This realization was a weight that was my own, a weight I had to lift and carry. There was no way around it and no way forward unless I picked it up and brought it with me.

Accepting responsibility for ourselves and our sins is the only way forward to the freedom of the daughters and sons of God, that freedom where we also find the Truth and the Life.

At a crossroads we expect a sign. Even after the sign can no longer speak the words of forgiveness, the sign itself remains, and we can still read what it says.