



‘Jesus, remember me’
Deathbed conversions reveal God’s infinite mercy

DEAR FATHER KERPER: I have three adult children. All three have left the Church. One says he is still a Catholic but doesn’t “get anything out of Mass,” so he hasn’t gone in 20 years. One says religion is obsolete and tags herself as agnostic. The third one is “too busy.” A friend of mine scolded me for worrying about them and said, “Don’t you know about deathbed conversions? Tell them to make an act of contrition and they’ll be just fine.” This sounds too good to be true and even unjust. Do we believe in deathbed conversions?

Many Catholics today suffer great anguish as they ponder what appears to be a complete loss of faith among their children and grandchildren. If you have a living faith, you also have hope. And the existence of “deathbed conversions” supports our hope.

But your friend’s description of such conversions as requiring nothing more than a hasty — and precise — recitation of the act of contrition is very misleading. It replaces the beautiful mystery of God’s mercy with a magical formula, which in turn makes the whole thing seem “too good to be true” and “even unjust.”

To begin with, the act of contrition is not primarily *from the lips and mouth*. Rather it emerges from the *heart and soul*. Strictly speaking then, words are not necessary because *conversion* happens deep within a person.



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As to being “too good to be true,” you’re right on target. A last minute conversion is indeed “too good” because God’s infinite kindness, goodness and mercy far exceed our human experience.

We discover this by closely studying the story of the two thieves who flanked the crucified Christ on Calvary. The New Testament has three different accounts.

St. Mark simply states: “And they crucified two bandits with him, one on the right and one on the left.” (Mk 15:27) St. Matthew repeats the words of St. Mark almost verbatim. Then he adds a crucial detail: “Even the bandits who were crucified with him taunted him in the same way.” (Mt 27:44) Think about it. The so-called good thief *actually continued his wickedness* while suffering on the cross. Fortunately, St. Luke alone preserved the story of the thief’s conversion. And given St. Matthew’s mention of *both* thieves “taunting” the Lord, we can reasonably surmise that the “good thief” waited until the last moment to “roll the dice.” He had absolutely nothing to lose by saying, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” (Lk 23:37) After all, if Jesus was just another false messiah, so be it. But if Jesus was indeed the true Christ, then the thief instantly became St. Dismas, the name given him by tradition.

Too good to be true? Yes. The Lord graciously accepted even the smallest speck of sorrow from the thief. The Church calls this “imperfect contrition,” which means sorrow motivated by fear of punishment rather than love.

As to the thief, we can reasonably suspect that the thief’s mixture of fear of God and love of Jesus, whom he had never met, tilted toward fear. But sacred Scripture affirms that the thief’s “interior and silent conversion” satisfied the Lord. Otherwise St. Luke, inspired by the Holy Spirit, would never have included the words of Jesus to the thief: “This day you will be with me in Paradise.”

You also suggested that “deathbed conversions” appear to be unjust. That makes perfect sense — at least from our human sense of justice. Who wants an A+ in math if everyone gets an A+, even the student who walked into the classroom as the dismissal bell rang?

God, through the prophet Ezekiel, responded to the charge of injustice. Ezekiel wrote:

“And though I say to the wicked that they shall die, if they turn away from sin and do what is just and right — returning pledges, restoring stolen goods, walking by statutes that bring life, doing nothing wrong — they shall surely live; they shall not die. None of the sins they committed shall be remembered against them. If they do what is right and just, they shall surely live. Your people say, ‘The way of the LORD is not fair!’ But it is their way that is not fair.” (Ez 33:14-17)

The human sense of justice is forever scandalized — and even angered — by the possibility that a faint and confused “act of contrition” may blot out a lifetime of horrible sin. But for those deeply touched by God’s grace, deathbed conversions, beginning with the thief’s, become radiant displays of God’s infinite mercy.

One such example is Oscar Wilde, a very flamboyant, cocky and controversial Irish poet/writer who became a Catholic on his deathbed in 1900. He acknowledged his insincerity earlier by writing, “I intend to die a Catholic, though I could never live as one.” (He wanted the A+ without much study!)

As things turned out, he died as a Catholic without living as a Catholic. Isn’t it unfair to consider him as a Catholic? Not at all. Less than two years before his death, he made an interesting comment about Jesus and the good thief. Wilde wrote:

“[Christ’s] primary desire was not to reform people, any more than his primary desire was to relieve suffering. To turn an interesting thief into an honest man was not his aim.... But in a manner not yet understood of the world, he regarded sin and suffering as being in themselves beautiful, holy things, and modes of perfection.”

How can this be? Because at the moment of conversion, those once paralyzed by their estrangement from God see “sin and suffering dissolve” as the Lord joyfully welcomes them home. Wilde also wrote: “Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future.” The good thief’s future began 2,000 years ago and bends infinitely forward. We all face the same possibility.

Your adult children all retain the sacred mark of baptism. They have brought new life into the world. They have you, a faithful woman as their mother. Should we not trust that at some point, sooner or later, each will softly whisper the words of the thief: “Jesus, remember me”? ■

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