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Letter of the Superior General: Lent 2004

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GENERAL CURIA

Lent 2004

To the members of the Congregation of the Mission

My very dear Confreres,

May the pardon and peace of the Lord be with you in abundance during this Lenten season!

All four gospels paint the same stark picture of Jesus' death: he dies crucified between two criminals, one on his right and one on his left. But whereas Mark, Matthew and John say almost nothing about the two criminals, Luke gives them speaking-roles in a dramatic episode. In fact, this scene is the longest and most important Lucan change in the crucifixion story. We usually refer to its main character as the "good thief," though Luke calls him neither "good" nor a "thief." While Mark and Matthew describe both men crucified with Jesus as "bandits," Luke simply refers to them as "wrongdoers," perhaps because, as the evangelist who most emphasizes gentleness, he wants to avoid placing Jesus in violent company at his death.

Later tradition gave various names to both wrongdoers (Joathas and Maggattras, Zoatham and Camma, Titus and Dumachus, Dysmas and Gestas). Most of these names are forgotten today, but some readers may still recall the good thief as "Dysmas." Under that name the Roman liturgical calendar assigned him a feast day, March 25, formerly regarded as the day of Jesus' crucifixion, but now celebrated as the feast of his incarnation. A charming legend, found in one of the apocryphal gospels, relates that when the Holy Family went down into Egypt two robbers set upon them. One, however, halted immediately when he saw the tears that welled up in Mary's eyes. It was these same robbers (now caught plying their trade in Jerusalem!) — so the story goes — who were crucified with Jesus. The one moved by Mary's tears was the good thief at Jesus' right.

But the gospels are silent about the wrongdoers' past history and personal lives. At first reading, the dialogue in the Lucan story seems simple and direct; yet in fact it is filled with subtle undertones. One of the wrongdoers, the evangelist states, joins his voice with those blaspheming Jesus: "Aren't you the Messiah? Then save yourself and us." But the "other wrongdoer" (Luke never calls him anything else)

rebukes his companion: "Have you no fear of God, seeing that you are under the same sentence? We deserve it, after all. We are only paying the price for what we've done, but this man has done nothing wrong." Notice that on the Lucan crucifixion stage the good thief plays the role of witness to Jesus' innocence. Later a second witness, the centurion, will confirm the good thief's judgment, testifying: "Surely this was an innocent man" (Lk 23:47).

Now the drama heightens as the good thief speaks directly to the crucified Lord: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

"Jesus!" This form of address is stunning in its intimacy. Nowhere else in the four gospels does anyone address Jesus simply by using his name without any further reverential qualification. Luke is applying an artistic touch to convey the genuineness of the wrongdoer's request. But note the irony too: for Luke, the first person with the confidence to speak so familiarly with the Lord is a convicted criminal, who is also the last person to speak with Jesus before his death. He phrases his plea in terms of "remembrance," a favorite Lucan word and one found on ancient Jewish gravestones: "Remember me." Contrary to all expectations, this wrongdoer, having heard Jesus mocked as "King of the Jews" and having concluded that an injustice is being done, believes that Jesus really will rule over a kingdom and humbly asks to be remembered.

Jesus responds with an "Amen" saying, the only use of this solemn form in Luke's passion narrative and also its sixth and final use in his gospel. Here the solemn formula introduces the bestowal of the free gift of God's forgiveness. Jesus' assurance goes beyond anything that the wrongdoer (or the reader) might have anticipated: "Amen, I say to you, this day you shall be with me in paradise." Much more is granted than was asked. The response includes not just forgiveness, but intimacy: you shall be *with me*. The good thief will, in Jesus' company, enjoy the fullness of happiness with God.

Let me offer you two brief reflections on this wonderful story, filled with Lucan flavor.

1. We believe that grace is a pure gift. God bestows it freely and abundantly. We do not earn it; we only respond to it. On the deepest level, grace is *God's presence*, God's offer of personal love and self-communication. The gift is the giver. God touches our hearts and stirs up, even creates, a response within us.

But it is important to note that this gift is not merely an unseen reality; rather, it comes in very concrete forms. The gospels remind us of this again and again. For the good thief in Luke's story, Jesus is grace. One can almost imagine this "other wrongdoer" studying Jesus and slowly arriving at the conclusion that the man beside him is not only innocent of a capital crime

but genuinely good. In fact — this little detail often goes unnoticed — Luke gives the good thief more time to observe Jesus than any of the other evangelists, since in his gospel (different from that of Mark, Matthew and John) the two wrongdoers walk the entire way of the cross with Jesus before dying with him (Lk 23:32). The goodness he sees in the person of Jesus touches the good thief's heart and evokes a response: "Jesus, remember me."

Isn't that how grace often works in us too? It enters our lives through the faithful witness of others, like our parents, or a self-giving servant of the poor, or a sick person who bears illness with courageous faith, or through the life of a saint or the death of a martyr whom we read about? The signs of God's love — what we call "grace" — are visible all around us. What is remarkable in the story of the good thief is that he does not turn in on himself in what surely must have been a desperately grim moment when his life was draining away. Instead of sinking into depression or despair, he sees goodness itself in the person of Jesus and utters a hopeful plea: "Jesus, remember me." He sees grace personified and responds.

2. My second reflection is also very Lucan. There is something remarkably humble in this "other wrongdoer." Unlike his companion, he recognizes the truth of his own situation. His sober analysis was, I suspect, shocking both for the first wrongdoer and for the bystanders: "We have been condemned justly. We are only paying the price for what we've done, but this man has done nothing wrong."

Thomas Merton once wrote: "We make ourselves real by telling the truth." Truth lies at the core of our being, straining to emerge. When we express the truth, we begin to build our true self. So it was for the good thief. Drawn by the innocence and goodness of the Lord, he recognized his own emptiness, and precisely in doing so, he was able to see, to hear, to receive, to be filled. There is a humble, and at the same time affectionate, ring in the good thief's plea: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus' warm response is a further Lucan testimony that the humble are exalted: "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." As St. Vincent often reminded his followers, to the humble all good can come, whereas the proud always remain empty.

As we enter upon our Lenten journey, I invite you to reflect with me on this beautiful Lucan scene. In a time when there is so much war, so much terrorism, so much hunger, so much disease, and so many senseless deaths, I encourage you to see the abundant signs of God's gracious love, even in the midst of suffering, as did the good

thief. I also pray, with you, that all of us in the Vincentian Family will know how to stand before the Lord, before each other, and before the poor with great truthfulness and humility. Humility will enable us to see our companions on the journey as grace in our lives, visible signs of God's presence and love.

As he approached the place of crucifixion, the "good thief" must surely have felt that this was his darkest hour. But for him, light shone in the darkness. He experienced, as the psalmist loved to sing (139:12): "For you, Lord, darkness itself is not dark and night shines as the day." If we stand before God humbly in this Lenten time, I am confident that we too will rejoice in the light of the Lord.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

firma autografa

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.

Superior General