

defend Him publicly. Then Christ invited that penitent criminal into His own home in heaven.

To whom did Christ make this promise? Our Lord promised heaven to a truly great sinner. In the face of this fact how can any sinner despair? There is no limit to the mercy of God. Our God is the Father of all prodigals. Ours is the God who receives the sinful son: "But while he was yet a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion, and ran and fell upon his neck and kissed him" (Luke 15: 20). Ours is the God who is a Good Shepherd. He goes after the stray sheep and lays it upon His shoulder, rejoicing. Ours is the God of whom the sacred writer told us: "He desires not the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way, and live" (Ezekiel 33:11).

Ours is the God of whom we read: "God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that those who believe in him may not perish, but may have life everlasting. For God did not send his Son into the world in order to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (John, 3: 16).

In 1553 there passed away in Frauenberg, East Prussia, one of the greatest astronomers and mathematicians of all time – Copernicus. His investigations changed man's idea of the universe. He was the first to prove that the sun was the center of our solar system. This thorough Catholic dedicated his great work, "The Revolution of the Heavenly Bodies," to Pope Paul III. Copernicus had the deeply humble spirit of all the truly great. As he lay dying, a copy of the book just mentioned was placed in his arms. He could have felt justly proud of his accomplishments. Yet, before God, he saw himself, not as an astronomer, not as a scholar, not as a successful scientist, but as a sinner. On his grave at Frauenberg is the epitaph chosen by himself:

"I do not seek a kindness equal to that given to Paul; nor do I ask the grace granted to Peter; but that forgiveness which Thou didst give to the robber, that I earnestly pray." His study of the starry world led him to the Creator of the universe. He asked for the mercy shown the penitent thief.

Contrast with Copernicus that class of Catholics who try to forget Christ in their guilt, who try to drown the promptings of conscience, who try to reason away God's law. They even attack Christ's Church and Christ's priests-to salve their conscience. That is what the wicked thief did.

With the good thief admit your guilt and plead for pardon. Do not, however, presume upon God's mercy. Be not like the fellow who answered the appeal of a priest that he mend his ways, by saying: "Oh, Father, I'm alright. Don't bother your head about me. I'll enjoy life while it lasts, and then at the end I'll turn to God and get saved – like the dying thief."

"Yes, indeed," said the priest, "but when the end comes I wonder which dying thief you will be like. There were two of them, remember."

The good thief received his precious promise because he cooperated with the grace God gave him. To every *one* of us God gives His bountiful grace. A thought, an inspiration, even a light, flashes into our soul. It may come from a sermon, or even one sentence of a sermon. It may come during Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. God gives sufficient grace to everyone.

God gave it to the good thief. He was given to know that this innocent Victim hanging beside him was the Son of God. He was given to know that Christ was dying for all sinners, and that He could give heaven itself to those who would ask it. Dismas worked with God's grace. He became a saint. Follow the good thief in his repentance, and in his cooperation with grace.

Christ hanging on the cross, with the good thief to His right and the bad thief to His left, always reminds me of the last judgment, as Christ Himself described it. The good will be to His right, the bad to His left. The line of the just, those who will be saved, is forming behind the contrite thief; the lost are lining up behind the impenitent thief. In that sense, you can choose tonight whether you will be saved or not.

Make your choice now. We are all sinners. The difference is that the good thief and Dutch Schultz thief repented, the bad thief and his followers did not. Which thief do you choose to follow?

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Pamphlet 460

“Stealing Heaven” The conversion of Dutch Schultz

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"Amen I say to thee, this day thou shalt be with me in paradise." St. Luke, 23: 43.

Arthur Simon Flegenheimer was born on August 6, 1902 in the Bronx. His parents were both German Jews. His mother, Emma had tried to raise little Arthur in the orthodox faith. Her efforts were not entirely in vain for in later years Arthur would develop respect for his religious upbringing. Later in life he became the notorious gangster known as Dutch Schultz

On Wednesday evening, October 23, 1935, Dutch Schultz was sitting with three companions in the rear of a tavern, the Palace Chop House in Newark, New Jersey. Dutch was a power in the underworld. He was a criminal of criminals. His name was linked with every type of crime from robbery, bootlegging, extortion, to cold-blooded murder.

As he sat there scheming with his gang, two men suddenly stood in the doorway with roaring guns. Critically wounded, Schultz staggered to the door. He was rushed to a hospital where he registered as a Jew; but next morning, feeling sure that he was face to face with death, he called for a Catholic priest. Father Cornelius McInerney was summoned. Schultz wanted to die a Catholic. Father McInerney gave him a few simple instructions, baptized him, and gave him the last rites of the Catholic Church. He then stayed and comforted the three women in the Dutchman's life – his mother, sister and wife. This arch criminal died at 8:35 p.m. on Oct. 24, 1935. Dutch Schultz was buried from a Catholic church Oct. 28, 1935 and was buried in a Catholic cemetery, the Gate of Heaven in New York City.

At once a roar of argument and protest arose in the streets, in the taverns, in the newspapers, on the subways, in the office buildings. People could not understand how the Church would accept such an evil man into her fold. They could not understand how this arch criminal could be taken up in the arms of that Church which expresses such a horror of the least sin; that Church which holds up such high ideals of virtue,

that Church which stood for the very opposite of the things Schultz had done all his life.

It was ridiculous, unthinkable that Dutch Schultz could be mingling with the angels; that this hardened hoodlum could be living with the holy people of all time, in heaven. It was unjust, unreasonable that he in a few moments could win the eternal reward for which struggling souls fought through years of trial and temptation.

Yet, there were many points which these horrified critics forgot. They forgot that there is One, and only One, who can judge rightly and completely and justly. They forgot that God alone knows all the angles – the bad example, the wicked environment, the godless home, the pull of temptation, and dozens of other influences in every person’s life. They forgot that God is always ready and willing to forgive, up to the very last breath of life. They forgot that God is offering His grace, His light, His strength, His very life to share. They also forgot, if they ever knew it, that taking Dutch Schultz into the Church in his last moments did not mean approval of his wicked life and his cruel deeds. It merely meant that God’s Church offered God’s grace to one who surely needed it, to one who wanted it, to one who seemed sincere, to one who had no possible reason, except a special gift of God, to call for a Catholic priest and to throw himself into the welcoming arms of Mother Church.

Above all, these critics forgot one story from the Bible, an incident that interests us; the story of the good thief. To that dying criminal on Calvary the Son of God Himself promised paradise. Christ’s Church continues to do what Christ did.

Sacred Scripture tells us that two criminals were crucified together with Christ, one on His right, the other on His left. Both were evildoers; both had robbed and murdered; both were guilty of death. Even while hanging on the cross one of them, the thief to the left, joined the Jews in jeering at Jesus. He shouted:

“If you are the Christ, save yourself and us!” St. Luke, 23: 39. The thief to the right rebuked him: “Do you not even fear God, seeing that you are under the same sentence? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving what our deeds deserved; but this man has done nothing wrong” (Luke 23:40). Then, turning to Jesus, he prayed: “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus said to him: “Amen, I say to you, this day you shall be with me in paradise” (Luke 23: 40-43).

We want to look closely at Christ and the good thief. We want to hear their words again and again. We want to think of what this scene means. We want to apply it to ourselves.

The promise Jesus made.

To this dying criminal on His right Jesus promised the kingdom of heaven. He promised He would take this thief into paradise. In the twinkling of an eye there was given to this robber the goal and prize of life; salvation. As someone has said, he was a robber to the last, he even stole heaven.

In a sense, the same promise has been made to everyone of us, under certain conditions. It is not enough to cry, “Lord, Lord”; we must do the will of our Father in heaven. Heaven is a great reward and a great reward demands a great effort. Two thoughts suggest themselves as we work for that reward:

To be worthy of heaven we must make ourselves as Christ-like as possible; we must do good; we must avoid evil. No ordinary, half-hearted effort will do. We must put forth more than average labor. The manner in which you keep the commandments could be an index of the effort you are generally putting into gaining heaven.

Our hope of heaven must not bog down into presumption, that is, thinking we will get there no matter what we do, no matter how little effort we put forth.

Jesus also promised this repentant thief companionship with Himself. Christ not only promises paradise, but also assures the good thief of intimate association with Himself. Fortunate fellow! He was in the company of Christ on Calvary. He would be in the company of Christ in heaven.

Christ had made a similar promise to His apostles and followers: “In my Father’s house there are many mansions. Were it not so, I should have told you, because I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I am coming again, and I will take you to myself; that where I am, there you also may be” (John 14:2-4).

What a glorious promise! What precious destiny! To be with Jesus, to share in His love and affection, to share in His glory, to walk with Him and talk with Him, to see Him, to be known by Him as a companion and friend, and to live with Him as a Companion and Friend. Thanks be to God for this promise.

This companionship with Christ will be ours on one condition - that we try to be with Christ on this earth. You are with Christ when you pray; you are with

Christ when you work and suffer; you are with Christ when you walk the way of the cross with Him; you are with Christ - as one - when you receive Him in Holy Communion; you are with Christ every time you step into a Catholic Church. Being with Christ in church is one of the best assurances we will be with Christ hereafter.

If you have failed Him, disobeyed Him, you can still be with Him, as the good thief was, by contrition and repentance.

This kingdom and companionship of Jesus was promised to the good thief *very soon*. “This day” - Christ promised him paradise. And “this day,” Christ promises us His heaven and His companionship. It may not be in the next twenty-four hours, but it will be in a few short years. Start now to make yourself worthy. Avoid sin, the only bar to heaven, the only obstacle to paradise. If you have sinned, delay not to convert, to call for forgiveness. Perform your work and bear your pains with patience. Whatever you must do from day to day is your means of winning heaven. Make use of your time. How many minutes – I will not say hours, but how many minutes do you give to God each week? If you have been half-hearted up to now, start “this day” to turn to God.

Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior of the world. He gave this promise, not in a flash of glory, not in a moment of joy or comfort, but in pain and agony. He made this promise, not in the height of honor, not when He was the object of affection, but when He was reviled and blasphemed. This convinces us of two things: Christ had an infinite love for sinners. He thinks not of His own pains, He thinks not of freeing Himself or lessening His own torture. He thinks rather of a penitent sinner. He turns His attention to one who is sorry.

How opposite our behavior! We think of our own ease and pleasure. In sickness, suffering and labor, we think, not of others, but of ourselves. Even in days of health and leisure, we are unwilling to make a small effort for a neighbor in physical or spiritual, distress.

The One who made this generous promise was infinite in power. Christ could have freed Himself, could have called His angels to destroy His tormentors. He chose to show His power by converting a sinner. Apparently helpless, our Savior reached out from the cross for a penitent soul. From the cross He reaches out for your soul.

Christ met a robber on Calvary. Our Lord understood, saw the contrite heart, heard this thief