

ST. DISMAS' STORY REMINDS US OF GOD'S MERCY



Each year, the Church invites us into the sacred rhythm of Lent, ushering each one of us to be united to the mystery of Jesus in the desert (*Catechism of the Catholic Church 540*).

We walk with Christ by embracing this season of sacrifice and penitential acts. By stripping away ourselves and immersing ourselves in the great Scriptural events of salvation history, the hope is that we might better understand and live the economy of salvation, draw closer to God's heart and further conform to it.

But there can be a temptation, conscious or not, to treat Lent like a checklist, to subtly believe that if we carry the heaviest cross, have the most rigorous prayer life and perform enough acts of charity, we will earn Heaven. It is tempting to see Heaven as a reward for getting it all right; indeed, there is some truth to that.

But I wonder if this is truly the purpose of Lent. Is this what God desires most for us?

For just as there is enough in Scripture and teaching to affirm that Heaven is the reward for those who have loved God well through works and faith (*CCC 1021*), there is enough to remind us that this eternal paradise is not earned by our own merit, but rather is a gift of God's grace — a grace that meets us not in our perfection, but in our need.

Augustine reminds us of this truth when he writes in *On Grace and Free Will*, "If, then, your good merits are God's gifts, God does not crown your merits as your merits, but as His own gifts."

Nowhere is this more beautifully illustrated than in the story of St. Dismas.

The "Penitent Thief," also known as the "Thief on the Cross" or the "Good Thief," is an unnamed man in the *Gospel of Luke*, though tradition lovingly refers to him as St. Dismas. Though the Catholic Church never formally canonized St. Dismas, he is regarded as a saint by virtue of Jesus saying he would be in Paradise.

St. Dismas meets Jesus for the first time on the cross, in the agonizing final hours of both their lives. From his vantage point, St. Dismas must have witnessed the scene below — the crowds jeering, the soldiers mocking, countless people reviling and rebuking Jesus.

Even his fellow criminal joined in the chorus of scorn, bitterly challenging Jesus' divinity. "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" (*Lk 23:29*). But something stirred within St. Dismas, for he saw something others could not.

Rather than echoing the insults, St. Dismas reproached this fellow criminal in defense of Jesus. "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong" (*Lk 23:40-41*).

Then, in an act of incredible humility and faith, St. Dismas turns to Jesus, uttering a desperate plea, “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power” (Lk 23:42).

And Jesus, full of mercy, did not hesitate. He did not tally all of Dismas’ wrongs, or note how he’d lived his life far from God. Instead, he turns to St. Dismas with an astonishing promise: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Lk 23:43).

The story of St. Dismas doesn’t diminish the importance of Lent or the call to a life of holiness. Instead, it brings into focus the heart of what these 40 days are meant to accomplish. Lent is a season for being conformed to Christ — for drawing closer to Him in prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

St. Ambrose writes, “For life is to be with Christ; where Christ is, there is life, there is the kingdom” (CCC 1025). If Heaven is to be with Christ, if life itself is to be with Christ, then Lent is not merely a time of sacrifice but an invitation to live with Him now.

St. Dismas reminds us of an essential aspect of Christ we cannot ignore — His boundless mercy. Yes, we must trust in God’s perfect justice and judgment, but we are also called to reflect His mercy in our own lives. The penitential acts of Lent — our sacrifices and disciplines — are meant to be purified by Christ’s love.

This is what transforms Lent from a season of drudgery, scorekeeping or chasing perfection into a season of grace. When we let go of striving and rest in Christ, Lent becomes less about what we do and more about who we are becoming — people who live with Him, in Him and through Him.

It is here, with Christ, that we begin, like Dismas, to taste the life of Heaven, even now. ■



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Looking forward to the next chapter

To our faithful community, As I write this, my time as President and CEO of Catholic Medical Center (CMC) is coming to a close. These final days are filled with reflection and gratitude — for the remarkable journey we’ve shared and the countless lives touched by the healing hands of this extraordinary organization.

With CMC beginning its new chapter as part of HCA Healthcare, the legacy of Catholic healthcare in Manchester will continue to flourish. This partnership brings new opportunities to expand resources, grow our mission and remain a vital part of the community we’ve served for more than 130 years.

Over the past 13 years, I have been privileged to witness the strength, compassion and faith of the CMC team. I have seen firsthand the dedication of those who make CMC what it is today — a place where faith meets exceptional care. Through challenges and triumphs, we have upheld our commitment to deliver care that reflects Christ’s love and compassion.

While I am transitioning out of my current role, I am not going far. I am excited to continue serving our community as the Executive Director of the Catholic Health Care Foundation of Greater Manchester.

Established through proceeds from our partnership with HCA Healthcare, the Foundation will address critical community needs by supporting Healthcare for the Homeless and the Poisson Dental Facility, ensuring care reaches those who need it most. In an upcoming Parable article, I will share deeper insights into the Foundation’s mission and our vision for the future.

CMC’s future is in excellent hands. With the expertise and resources of HCA Healthcare and the incredible talent of the CMC team, this organization is well-positioned to thrive. While change can bring uncertainty, it also brings great promise, and I look forward to witnessing all that lies ahead for CMC and our community.

As I close this chapter and look toward the next, I am deeply grateful for your trust, support and prayers. My family and I have been truly blessed to be a part of this community for the past 30 years, and I am excited for all that the future holds.

May God bless you and your families. ■

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