

SEVENTH WORD

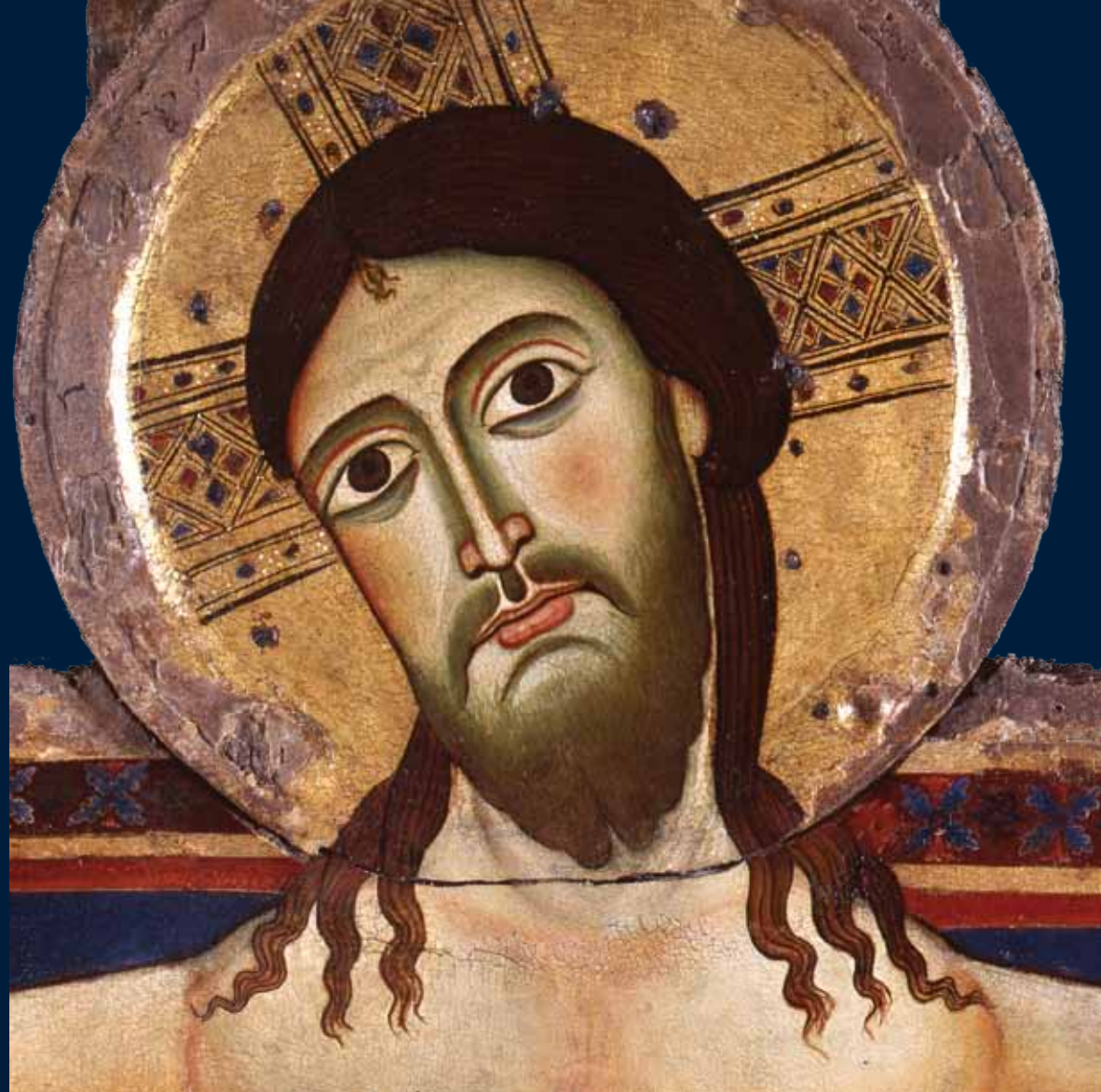
It was now about noon and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon because of an eclipse of the sun. Then the veil of the temple was torn down the middle. Jesus cried out in a loud voice,

“FATHER, INTO YOUR HANDS
I COMMEND MY SPIRIT”;

and when he had said this he breathed his last.

Lk 23: 44-46

The Face of the Crucified Jesus



I thirst” (Jn 19: 28). Crucifixion, with its loss of blood, dehydrates the condemned man. He suffers physically. So Christ’s fifth word is not unexpected. “I thirst.” With a practical unanimity, spiritual authors of every period tell us that Christ thirsts for more than something liquid to drink. His real thirst is for souls. The suffering, parched Lord proclaims that he thirsts for the salvation of the world. Thomas Aquinas represents one of many witnesses to make the point. This thirst, says Aquinas, expresses Christ’s “ardent desire for the salvation of the human race.”¹ Today the Church speaks of the universal call to holiness.

Catholic faith always remains eminently personal. So when we hear



Jesus cry out, “I thirst,” we should think first of all about ourselves. Jesus thirsts very much for my soul. He wants me. This instinct betrays neither selfishness nor egoism. This very Catholic instinct rather reflects the order of charity. We see this ordering in the two great commandments that govern true religion: First, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Then comes the command to love oneself: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22: 37, 39).

Jesus thirsts for souls. Even on his Cross, the suffering Lord manifests himself as the Good Shepherd. Christ’s own words give evidence of his pastoral solicitude: “I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd

lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn 10: 11). What does it mean that he “lays down his life for the sheep”? It means that Christ’s death brings new life, a new self, a new creation to the poor banished children of Eve. At the same time, his death introduces a new order into the world. A new sacramental order. From the pierced side of Christ flow blood and water, the source of the Church’s sacramental life. Yes, Jesus thirsts. He thirsts for those who have been reborn into the new life that Baptism confers. He thirsts also for those who still await receiving the Gospel, who still wait for the sacraments of new life.

From the wood of a cross sanctified by his blood, God’s own Son expresses the purpose of his becoming man. Jesus, one like us in all things



but sin, thirsts for the souls of those whom he came to save. Who are they? The answer is simple: everybody. He came to save everybody, beginning with Adam. Salvation is a reciprocal exercise. Jesus wants to love us, and he also wants us to love him in return. So he thirsts. The thirst that Jesus experiences at his death endures throughout the ages. He thirsts for everybody who now lives, and for everybody who will come into the world until the end of time. Everybody. This last word of Jesus provides a first word for every Christian: “We love because he first loved us” (1 Jn 4: 19). “I thirst!” The priority of the divine initiative takes on human expression in these two words of a dying, dehydrated, and therefore thirsty man.