

For most all of us, whether we are a “cradle Catholic” or a convert, the faith is a journey where we are striving to see God. That vision needs constant correction, which is why there are the sacraments. But while we all kind of ebb and flow a bit in our faith, one of the things that is so important to remember is God is not up in heaven with a stopwatch or ledger, but rather is always there waiting for us to find Him like the Prodigal Son’s father was waiting on the hill for him to return home. And our faith is full of incredible stories of people who did that.

“Great sinners make great saints. God has big plans for you.” These are words of wisdom from the Church as handed down by Servant of God Fr. John A. Hardon, SJ, which explain the lives of great saints.

In Sacred Scripture we meet St. Matthew, whose feast day was just yesterday; a reviled tax collector, who became one of the apostles; Mary Magdalene, and St. Dismas, a repentant thief, who was promised Paradise as he died next to Christ on the cross.

Likewise, St. Augustine of Hippo not only espoused paganism for a time, but also fathered a child out of wedlock and yet became the most prolific writer as a father of the Church.

St. Callixtus, a thief, brawler, and felon, became a Pope and died a martyr.

In the 1950s, a man known for his immorality was executed for killing a cop. However, he died as a follower of Christ and he tried to convert his family from his prison cell during his last days.

On April 6, 1930 an avowed atheist and his wife brought Jacques Fesch into this world in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France. Accounts differ on whether the father was close to his son or distant. Little is known about Jacques 'mother, but she was at least nominally Catholic.

Jacques seemed to be a troublemaker from his earliest days. He neglected his schoolwork, disrupted classes, and made mischief until he was finally expelled from school. As he grew older, he did not improve and failed to practice any semblance of faith, soon living a life of crime and hedonism.

Although his father managed to get Jacques a job in a bank, Jacques wasted the opportunity by his laziness and bad attitude and was soon fired. Time after time his father found him other jobs, all with the same result.

In the meantime, Jacques 'life spiraled into deeper immorality. His main objective in life was to enjoy the pleasures of this world, not caring what the consequences were. He rarely took responsibility for his actions.

Before he was 24, he had fathered a child out of wedlock by his girlfriend, Pierrette, whom he married before his daughter was born. Jacques felt no compunction to care for either his wife or his daughter, and likely cheated on her.

Once again, after this relationship ended, Jacques continued his womanizing and fathered an illegitimate son, a son who never knew who his father was until years after Jacques was executed.

Jacques 'avoidance of God and his total abandonment to worldly pleasures cast him into a deep depression. In an effort to break free of his misery, he

decided to sail to the South Pacific. He dreamed of buying a yacht and living an idyllic life of constant pleasure and relaxation on a tropical island.

Jacques, an adulterer, thief, and ruffian, became angry when his father refused to support his plan in any way. Undeterred by the refusal, Jacques continued to scheme. He decided to steal the money to fund his quest by diabolical means.

Alexander Silberstein's currency shop soon became his target. Foolishly, Jacques entered the shop just as the rush hour was beginning on February 25, 1954. He beat Silberstein relentlessly with his pistol, grabbed 300,000 francs — hardly enough to finance his scheme — and fled.

Having lost his glasses in the scuffle, he fled from the shop as Silberstein stumbled out the door, shouting for help. A witness saw Jacques flee and called the police. Later this same witness recognized Jacques. The police officer cornered him, drawing his gun and telling Jacques to halt and surrender.

The police officer, Jean Vergne, was a 35-year-old father. Jacques '

response to the order was to pull his pistol and shoot the officer three times in the chest, killing him instantly. Others wrestled Jacques to the ground and he was arrested.

Pictures of Jacques show an emaciated man with darkened eyes and sunken cheeks from his dissipated lifestyle. During the trial, he proved his evil nature by his nasty responses to questions, and total lack of remorse. The jury had little trouble finding him guilty of his crime, and he was sentenced to death by the guillotine.

By the mercy of God, Jacques sat on death row in solitary confinement for three years, allowing him time for his conversion, and finally for his repentance.

There were three men, the prison chaplain, his lawyer, and a monk who was a friend of Pierrette, his wife, who never abandoned Jacques.

On being taken to La Santé Prison, Fesch was immediately placed in solitary confinement. With only an hour's recreation—a walk around a prison courtyard—his life was to be his cell and the discipline of the prison

regime. Soon after his arrival he was visited by the prison chaplain. Fesch informed the priest: he “had no faith,” and with that politely dismissed him. The prosecution of his crimes began to grind slowly into action, and, as a result, he was appointed an advocate as his legal representative. His name was Baudet, and he was a devout Catholic. Fesch was intrigued by his lawyer: combining, as he did, professionalism coupled with a concern for his imprisoned client, as well as an interest, and fear for, the immortal soul of the man who was by then facing the full sanction of the law.

His conversion took some time, but finally after nearly one year, the realization, the horror of what he had done, struck him. As he wrote in his journal that he began to keep, “The Spirit of the Lord seized me by the throat.”

Immediately, he asked for the prison chaplain so that he could make his Confession after many years.

He began a life of deep prayer as his journals indicate — even becoming a mystic.

Jacques also sought to repay the many and deep hurts he had caused his family. He reconciled with his wife and daughter. He also wrote many letters to his family, including his brother and stepmother.

During Jacques' last two years, he wrote much in his journal about his conversion, his love of God and the Blessed Virgin Mary, and his repentance. At the end, he serenely accepted his sentence.

His letters reveal a man no longer preoccupied with seeking pleasure. Rather he sought to comfort others and to console them and convert them.

“I am living through marvelous hours, and I feel as if I had never lived any other life than the one I've been experiencing now,” he once wrote. “Jesus draws me to Himself, and knowing the weakness of soul He gives me much, while asking for so little. For each effort that I make I receive another grace, and, in view of the shortness of time, this ascent toward God is achieved far more quickly than it would be for someone who still had years ahead of him.”

His last journal entry before he died was, “In five hours, I will see Jesus.”

On October 1, 1957, just before he died on the guillotine, Jacques pronounced his last words, asking the Blessed Virgin Mary to have mercy on him.

After his death, Pierrette and his daughter worked with Sr. Veronica, a Carmelite nun, and Fr. Augustin-Michel Lemonnier to publish the writings of Jacques Fesch. Since the 1970s, his writings have brought encouragement to many souls. Many plays have also been written about him.

An appeal for clemency failed, but after his death his wife and daughter honored his memory as an example of redemption. He was hated at first by many in the public, but with the work of a Carmelite nun and a priest, the family published his writings, and from the 1970s on they inspired many. In the 90s his cause for beatification was opened. His collection of letters is called "Light Upon the Sacfold: The Prison Letters of Jacques Fesch."

Indeed, our faith is full of people who have come late to the faith if you will; starting with Saint Dismas, the good thief we hear of when we hear Luke's Passion, and Jesus assures him that he will be with him in paradise that day.

That said, sometimes I think it can be hard for us to grasp the power of God's mercy.

This week, we have the story of the laborers who are all hired by the owner, and each is given the same pay. It certainly seems unfair. For why should those who only worked a brief amount of time get the same amount as the others? The parable is not meant to be taken as a blueprint for union contract negotiations. But it is meant to challenge us on how we see the nature of God, and how we understand heaven.

Key of God's nature is the line from the landowner, "am I not free to do as I wish with my own money?" God is love; and God loves all the same. We say "well that's great but how is that fair," but it gets to mercy being even more important than justice. Humanity has sinned, but God's response to us always is to forgive 77 times; to meet us with compassion. Even those of us who may have been the "cradle Catholics" or done many good things for a very long time can probably look at our lives and see ways we could improve. God will always meet us where we are at, and like the Prodigal Son's father, embrace us when we come to Him, whether we lost our way

for a short time or a long while, or have been with Him always. The key is to not end up like the older brother in that story, bitter and resentful, not understanding what love is all about.

And that gets to the point about the nature of God and where we meet Him. Jesus said I am the way, the truth and the life. As Saint Catherine of Sienna put it “The Way to Heaven is Heaven.” So what does that mean? It means we enter into a personal relationship with Christ. He’s not just an example for how we live our life so we can enter heaven; if that were the case, we’d become a Pharisee, just following rules and regulations. Pope Benedict XVI said Christianity is not just an intellectual pursuit; we follow a Person. And that person is love incarnate; heaven is where there is perfect love between ourselves and God and one another. It’s why in the end love remains forever. As such we try to have heaven here now; earth is not some place to be escaped, and heaven is not where we never run out of vacation time or have to go back to work. If you think of a saint in heaven who helped people, if in heaven they were asked to help someone again would they say no, I’m here, no more of that, I’m on vacation? Of course not. This is why it’s important to look into our hearts and ask ourselves if there are things like anger which we reflected on last week, or envy

towards our neighbor. God will never short change us; He will love us completely. Why should we preoccupy ourselves with what others have done in the past if they are sincere in their love for God at this moment? This parable might challenge us a bit, but it also can make us introspective and realize perhaps there is some jealousy or animosity or things in our own heart. It shines the light of love on the darkness in our soul where there may be an absence of love. Perhaps we have been doing to Mass for a while and helping people and working hard, but it does not mean we are without areas for growth. The challenge is to recognize that and remember that God will always meet us where we are at. Note that everyone in the Gospel is a day laborer, without steady income, and they all need the generosity of someone to come along to give them a job to survive. Due to sin and bad decisions we are also without a steady paycheck if you will. We are entirely dependent upon God for all, and that is OK.

Lastly, it's important to remember that if in the end love is what remains, like the landowner, like the chaplain, the monk, the wife of Jacques and his lawyer, all of them never gave up. The landowner kept going back to get more laborers out of mercy, wanting to help them. The people in Jacques life never gave up on him, and now his words have inspired so many

around the world. Sometimes in life we can give up on people. If our attitude is one of love, we are again rejoicing when a sinner finds their way, and through our prayers and perseverance, we can do so much to bring a sinner closer to God.

In the kingdom of God there is only one wage: eternal life. While some spend many hours (many years) laboring, others, like Jacques, are found by the master of the vineyard at the eleventh hour, but the wage always remains the same. This is really the only wage that matters: eternal life with God in heaven.