

## Editor's Notes for *Letrillas para las Tres Horas de Viernes Santo*

In the Spanish Roman Catholic tradition, Holy Week (the time between Palm Sunday and Easter) is not only the most important event of the liturgical year, but a time of especial religious devotion. Prayer vigils, Masses, and processions mark this time of penitence and of anticipation of Christ's Resurrection.

On Good Friday, the solemn commemoration of Christ's crucifixion, it has long been a Church tradition to meditate and pray on the seven phrases attributed by the Gospels to the crucified Jesus, referred to collectively as The Seven Last Words from the Cross, or simply The Seven Words –In Spanish, *Las Siete Palabras*:

Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do (Luke 23:34)

Verily I say unto thee, To-day shalt thou be with me in paradise (Luke 23:43)

Woman, behold thy son! (Then saith he to the disciple) Behold thy mother! (John 19:26–27)

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34; Psalm 22)

I thirst. (John 19:28)

It is finished. (John 19:30)

Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit. (Luke 23:46)

Though the Gospel authors are not entirely consistent on this, tradition based on John's Gospel holds that Christ was crucified on the sixth hour (*hora sexta*) in the Roman timekeeping (what we now call noon) and expired on the ninth hour (*hora nona*, 3:00 pm). *Las Tres Horas* thus refers to these three hours, a time during which a crucified Christ would have uttered the Seven Words, and to the ritual meditation that accompanies them in Church custom.

In 1660, the Jesuit Francisco del Castillo, known as "the apostle of Indians and Blacks" led for the first time in his native Lima (today, the capital of the South American nation of Peru) a meditation on The Seven Words timed to span the three hours of Christ's agony on the cross. In it, he compared Christ's suffering with the suffering of the poor, the slaves, and the Indigenous peoples of his colonial birthplace. The tradition of a three-hour long Good Friday meditation (presumably stripped later by the Church hierarchy of its controversial social subtext) was thus born, and quickly caught on in the Americas and in Europe, though it is no longer common in our hectic 21<sup>st</sup> century. This liturgical service consisted of readings from the Passion Gospel alternated with prayers, sermons, and congregational singing.

Hilarión Eslava wrote these *Letrillas* (a simple hymn) precisely for this event. The heading of the printed score reads: "*Letrillas* for the Three Hours of Good Friday or in between the Seven Words, for three or four voices with piano or organ, music by the maestro Hilarión Eslava." The title is followed by this note: "These *Letrillas* have been composed so they can be sung in (the liturgy of) The Seven Words, or in between Words, and may also be used in any other event." A footnote on the first page additionally indicates that "If only three voices are available, the Tenor part can be omitted." The precise author of the Spanish lyrics is uncertain, but the first stanza and the *Coplas* appear on pages 5 and 11 of an anonymous devotional booklet titled (*sic*) "Ejercicio de las Tres Horas. Modo Practico de Contemplar las

Siete palabras que en la Cruz habló Cristo Señor Nuestro”, printed in 1839 in Barcelona by Manuel Texéro<sup>1</sup>. The second chorus is obviously only a slight variation of the first.

The date of the composition is not known, but we do know from an annotation on the first page that the score was printed by Eslava’s nephew Bonifacio Eslava when he had his print shop at the Calle Ancha de San Bernardo in Madrid, and therefore, between 1861 and 1868. Style-wise, this piece seems to have a lot in common with the penitential music Eslava wrote for the *Hermandades* of Sevilla in the early 1850’s.

### Lyrics and Translation

<p><i>Letrillas</i></p> <p>Al Calvario almas llegad, que nuestro dulce Jesús desde el ara de la cruz, hoy a todos quiere hablar. (sí, quiere hablar.)</p>	<p>Chorus</p> <p>To Calvary all souls must come, for our sweet Jesus from the altar of the cross on this day, to all He wants to speak. (yes, He wants to speak.)</p>
<p><i>Coplas</i></p> <p>Pues que fui vuestro enemigo, mi Jesús, como confieso rogad por mí, que con eso seguro el perdón consigo.</p>	<p>Verse</p> <p>For I was your enemy, my Jesus, now as I confess pray for me, for with that I am certain to be forgiven.</p>
<p>Cuando loco te ofendí, no supe lo que me hacía, buen Jesús del alma mía, rogad al Padre por mí.</p>	<p>When out of my mind I offended you I did not know what I was doing, my dearest good Jesus, pray to the Father for me.</p>
<p><i>Letrillas</i></p> <p>Al calvario almas llegad, que nuestro dulce Jesús desde el ara de la cruz, hoy a todos va a salvar. (sí, va a salvar.)</p>	<p>Chorus</p> <p>To Calvary all souls must come, for our sweet Jesus from the altar of the cross on this day, to all salvation He will grant. (yes, salvation He will grant.)</p>

<sup>1</sup> On Google Books, at [https://www.google.com/books/edition/Ejercicio\\_de\\_las\\_tres\\_horas/TPt3ZvJOgKkC?hl=en&gbpv=0](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Ejercicio_de_las_tres_horas/TPt3ZvJOgKkC?hl=en&gbpv=0), last consulted on April 16, 2022. Public domain.