

CHRIST'S DEATH, PRICE OF THE NEW COVENANT

Good Friday
April 13, 1979

Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Hebrews 4:14-16, 5:7-9
John 18:1-1:42

My dear sisters and brothers.

Today's liturgy is focused on this idea: the death of Christ is the price that was paid in order to establish the New Covenant. I have been insistent on this theme of the Covenant that we have reflected on during Lent because I want this idea of our Redemption to be understood and to penetrate our lives. From Old Testament times, God has presented himself to the people in the context of a Covenant or pact. The prophets then translated this as a testament, thus the words Old Testament and New Testament.

Resuming this biblical message in the expression *The death of Christ, the price of the New Covenant*, three exclamations occur to me: What a high price! But what a rich inheritance! And therefore, what a serious responsibility for the redeemed!

What a high price!

What a high price! These words come to us spontaneously when we listen to the words of the Jesus as he dies: *It is finished* (1). He paid humanity's debt and did so at the cost of his own life. Thus God's centuries old plan was fulfilled. Thus we witness the heroic obedience of the Son of God who became man and submitted himself to the will of God. This heroic obedience paid the debt of our disobedience, our disobedience to the Law of God.

The Covenant that God established with humankind from the time of Noah, Abraham and Moses, the Covenant that the prophets announced always included the concept of death and demanded a victim. The Bible tells us that when Moses read to the people the content of God's Covenant, animals were killed and part of the blood was poured over the altar and the remaining blood was sprinkled over the people. (2) Thus the people were united by the blood of the animals that were sacrificed. The concepts of blood and death become more real when the prophets explain the content of the Covenant that God established with humankind. This was not a Covenant between two equal partners, but rather humankind is subordinated to God but the Covenant becomes a reality through the grace and the gifts that God wanted to share with humankind. The Covenant is like an inheritance and therefore the Covenant is often referred to as a Testament. It is like a father who wants to leave an inheritance to his children. Thus from this time forward the Covenant is called a Testament.

The New Testament explains that in order for the Testament to take effect, the testator must die. Thus the death of Jesus on Good Friday is the condition, the price that had to be

paid in order for humankind to receive all the Messianic gifts that had been promised to them. These are given to them as an inheritance: He has died! The Testator has died! Christ takes on the painful role of the head of a family who dies so that his family can enjoy the inheritance that God had promised them. Thus the death of Christ is the price that must be paid to establish this New Covenant.

As we listen to today's readings, to the account of Jesus' suffering, we exclaim: what a high price! As the prophet Isaiah, in the first reading, presents us with the image of the *man of suffering*, we see that he was burdened with afflictions and suffering, yet he did not have to undergo all this suffering but does so in the name of all sinners. He accepted responsibility for all of us. This, then, is Christ's tragedy: even though he was innocent and the beloved Son of God, because the Father accepted his generosity to come among us and accepted responsibility for all of us, yet God exacted from him a painful death, a price that we all owed him. In the divine justice of Christ, we were exonerated from the punishment that we merited.

Christ died violently on the cross. The prophet says: *He was spurned and avoided by men, a man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity, one of those from whom men hide their faces, spurned, and we held him in no esteem... but he was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins* (3). This is the divine justice that was demanded of God's Beloved in order for all of us to be forgiven. We will never be able to understand this mystery unless we consider the respect and love that Jesus had for his Father. The will of my Father! Obedience to my Father! Jesus said: *this is my bread to do the will of my Father* (4). The meaning of pain recovers its redemptive value only when it is suffered in obedience.

It is terrible to think of how many people suffer and yet gain no merit. Think of the waiting rooms in our hospitals --- how many are there offering their pain to God, offering their pain as a sign of their obedience to the Lord's plans? Reflect also upon the many people who suffer and the rebelliousness of so many people as they confront God's will. Instead of respect and obedience to the Father who treats them as children of God who have been disobedient and rebellious, the rebellious ones continue to cry out against God. It makes one reflect: our thinking is so different and so much merit is being lost! If we could only imitate Christ and give our suffering and pain a redemptive meaning and demonstrate a willingness to obey the will of the Father!

For this reason the Church preaches conversion because, my dear brothers and sisters, she wants us to be able to discern between those things that are pleasing and not pleasing to God. There are forms of suffering that God does not want us to have to experience, forms of suffering caused by other people. In such cases, those who sin by abusing, and torturing men and women are not acting in accord with the will of God. They are contradicting the Lord. The victims, the oppressed and those who suffer the pain of torture not only bear this pain but are also able to offer this suffering to God, and thus obtain redemption for the People of God. Thanks to God there is a sense of solidarity with people who have so often been the victims of unjust suffering. Like Christ who was sentenced to death, those who are tortured often die. In this way all injustice and oppression becomes a participation in the Lord's salvation. This is precisely what occurs with the suffering of our country, our families and our sisters and brothers, especially those from the poorer classes --- they offer their suffering up to God for all of us. They are rebellious, but before God, they accept their suffering. We must continue to struggle for the just demands of people, but as long as these are not obtained, we must

recognize that there is a Redeemer who offered himself in order that all injustice might cease to exist and that a world might be built according to his plan.

Such a high price was paid in order to establish this New Covenant and by his death Christ, as Redeemer, merited this Covenant. In the gospel that we have just heard, we have followed step by step the tragic outcome of this price that Christ paid so willingly because he loved us.

What a great Covenant!

Let us concentrate on this covenant. What a great Covenant is given to us this afternoon as Jesus hands himself over to death! Death is the price that was paid for this great Covenant that is now placed in our hands. We must decide whether we will rejoice in and accept this inheritance.

In the first reading, as sunrise follows sunset, so too the suffering on the cross is followed by the triumph of Christ... *my servant shall prosper* (5); he shall be raised up and greatly exalted when he hands over his life to atone for the sins of humankind. *He will see his descendents in a long life... through his suffering, my servant shall justify many* (6).

In the second reading we see the reward of Jesus' sacrifice: the high priest has been presented in heaven and is seated on the throne of grace and mercy. (7) This high priest brings about the eternal salvation of all those who place their hope in him. Jesus has assumed this position in the Kingdom because the Father has given great merit to all the suffering that he endured on Calvary.

The pierced side of Jesus that is spoken about in today's reading is a precious symbol and part of the eternal inheritance of his sacrifice. How horrible! A crucified person would not die because he was still able to breathe. Despite all the pain from supporting his legs on the nails that were driven into his muscles, he was still able to raise his thorax and breathe --- thanks to this he was able to live. When his executioners wanted to put him to death, they broke his legs. He would no longer be able to raise his head, and thus he would stop breathing. The crucified one would die of asphyxiation. The torture of the cross led to asphyxiation. When the soldiers came toward Jesus to break his legs, they saw that he was dead and therefore it was not necessary to break his legs as was customary. (8) For greater security, however, a soldier pierced Jesus' side with his lance. In a final gesture of goodness Jesus allowed the final drops of blood and water to flow from his heart. How many mythical images have been inspired by the pierced side of Jesus! The Fathers of the Church say: the Church is born from the pierced side of Christ.¹ Those two rivers of blood and water are symbols of redemption, which through the sacraments cleanses the world of sin.

I would like to focus on this inheritance, this testament that Catholics call the Seven Last Words of Christ --- words that Christ pronounced while on the cross. There is not time to make a profound analysis of these words at this time but I want to present them to you to remind you that the person who proclaimed these words died an agonizing death for us. Listen to the words that, together with the drops of blood, fall from Jesus' lips. They are a summary of the Covenant that God established with humankind.

Father, forgive them, they know not what they are doing (9). The great fruit of the redemption is the forgiveness of our sins. There is no greater joy than the conversion of

sinner. Therefore, during this Holy Week, all Christians should take time to reflect on these words of Jesus that show his willingness to forgive sins.

Jesus' second word is directed toward a convert. The thief at his side asks to be remembered by Jesus when he enters his kingdom: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. I have faith that you are the Son of God. I believe in your innocence. I am guilty but you are innocent. I have defended you.* (10). Jesus responds: *Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.* This is another great gift that forms part of the inheritance that we have received from Christ: the transcendence of our hopes. To hope for a kingdom even in death, like the good thief, victim of our own failings. Bound up in our misery, yet there is always a sense of hope: remember me when you come into your kingdom. Christ extends his hands to bring us to his kingdom if we truly repent and convert.

Jesus' third word is an inheritance for his mother: *Woman, behold your Son* (John 19:26). In the person of John, Jesus has spoken to all of us: *Son behold your mother* (11). From that time a special relationship was established between Mary and the Christian community and the name of the Virgin, through the praying of the *Hail Mary*, is invoked millions of times an hour, as our petitions rise up to the gentle maternal throne of Mary.

When Christ feels the loneliness, the anguish and the trials of his heroic obedience as abandonment by the Father, he cries out: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (12). He has not been abandoned, but he feels this pain and anguish that the human heart must suffer on more than one occasion. It is the psychology of suffering: one feels alone, misunderstood by all, and abandoned. In this loneliness Christ has given us these words that can be seen as a prayer, a religion, and a faith in the true God. God is not failing us when we do not feel his presence. Let's not say: God does not do what I pray for so earnestly --- therefore I do not pray anymore. God exists, and he exists even more, the farther you feel from him. God is closer to you when you think he is farther away and does not hear you. When you feel an anguished desire for God to come near because you do not feel him present, then God is very close to your anguish. When are we going to understand that God not only gives happiness but also tests our faithfulness in moments of affliction? It is then that prayer and religion have more merit: when one is faithful in spite of not feeling the Lord's presence. Let us learn from that cry of Christ that God is always our Father and never forsakes us, and that we are closer to him than we think.

Christ reaches the height of his agony but knows that in the plan of salvation, one detail has not been fulfilled. Scripture says: *for my thirst they gave me vinegar* (13). In fulfillment of this passage Jesus cries out: *I thirst* (14). A soldier wets a sponge in vinegar and squeezes it against the lips of the dying Christ.

And when the Scriptures have been fulfilled with the above detail, Jesus pronounces the words: *It is finished* (15). All the details that the Father had planned for this tragic Covenant -- the price, the suffering --- in order that the Father might bless humanity, have been fulfilled. *It is finished.* My sisters and brothers, who among us could say that our life was the fulfillment of the Father's will. I repeat that it is sad to see how many people develop their lives in a way that places the will of God on the margins, and perhaps the will of God is not even taken into consideration. How many are searching for happiness in ways that have not been pointed out by God. How many at the time of their death will be unable to repeat the words of Jesus: *It is finished.* How terrible to have to say that we have lived our lives in opposition to the will of God; our lives have been a negation of the love that God asked from

me; our life has been filled with crime and violence and hatred. Let us not live our lives in ways that are opposed to God's will. Let us walk on those roads where we would like to be found when God asks us to give an accounting of our lives. How wonderful to be able to say with Jesus: *It is finished*. Let our lives be a poem about the plan of God and let us live in accord with that plan. May we live as God wants us to live! May we follow the vocation that God has given us! May we be the people that God wants us to be.

Seeing that everything had been accomplished, Jesus cries out his final words: *Father, into your hands I commend my spirit* (16). Again we come face to face with the reality of transcendence. My sisters and brothers, we are not going to remain in the grave and our life is not going to be a branch of history or measured by the applause that is given to our success. All of this will go to the wind! What is most important is to place our souls in the hands of God. This is the goal that should inspire every step that we take.

What a great inheritance! How great is the Covenant that God has established with us and that demanded his Son to pay a price of such great suffering!

What a serious responsibility!

What a serious responsibility for people who have been redeemed. In today's readings this is implied in the letter to the Hebrews that invites us *to remain firm in the faith* (17) and to *approach confidently the throne of grace* (18). Saint John, as he concludes his account of the passion, writes: *It is this disciple who testifies to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true... these are written that you may come to believe* (19). This is our responsibility: to have faith and hope. Pessimism should be far from us! Despair should be far from us! During this Holy Week, which we celebrate in the context of our national situation, the death of Christ should not discourage us but should help us to realize that he is very near to us. The price of our redemption was very costly and now God is willing to give us his mercy and redemption. Only one thing is lacking: we, the people who have been redeemed, must have faith and must place our trust in the Lord. With a Christian attitude, let us understand all that Christ did in order to pay our debt. Let us embrace the gifts of redemption. Let us learn how to lovingly kiss the cross of Jesus Christ (in just a few moments you will be invited to do this) so that we can say *O holy Cross, you are the only hope of our life and history*.

My sisters and brothers, let us make this redemption real in our midst. Let us complement the painful price that Christ paid with the small price of our contribution, namely, our suffering, our willingness to hand over our lives, our faith, and our identification with the Redeemer. He only asks us to believe in him and to hope in him. So be it.

¹ See St John Chrysostom, *Homilies*, MG 51, 229.