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THE HUMILIATION AND EXALTATION OF THE SON OF GOD

**The Passion of the Lord
Good Friday
24 March 1978**

*Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9
John 18:1-19, 42*

After listening to the word of God on this Good Friday afternoon, this narration of the tragedy of Calvary, it might be best to remain silent, adoring the Divine Redeemer with grateful hearts. But it is necessary, it is the obligation of the celebrant to apply this eternal word to those of us present in this ceremony. The liturgy is not simply remembrance; it is making present.

Here in the cathedral on this March afternoon of 1978, Christ offers the inexhaustible source of his redemption to us who have come here with faith and hope to contemplate this mystery of redemption. It is as though what was just read were happening before our eyes, as if we were now being sprinkled with the blood poured out on Calvary.

The three powerful readings show us the limitless measure of this gesture of love called redemption. The first reading presents us with the abasement of Christ to a depth of humiliation that cannot be described. The second reading from the letter to the Hebrews exalts this person humbled on the cross to the heights of heaven where he is made High Priest of our salvation. And the beautiful reading of the passion by the young seminarians tells us how all of this occurred: the humiliation and the exaltation.

In a few moments we will have the heart of the Good Friday liturgy, the adoration of the cross. This is not a sad ceremony but a ceremony that proclaims the triumph of the cross. It is a triumphal hymn to the most glorious banner that has been raised on high in all of history: the holy cross. The cross signifies Christ's humiliation but also proclaims the exaltation of the Son of God as the Redeemer of humankind. That is why, if you have listened with keen faith to the passion narrative written by the mystical pen of Saint John the evangelist, you discover that everything appears to be a hymn of triumph, even during the most humiliating moments related there. John has a heavenly, triumphal perspective, and he projects his celestial vision onto the blood and the suffering that he tells us about. The silent Lamb who is humbled is the Son of God who will be exalted, and he will be exalted from this very afternoon.

The Servant of God takes on his shoulders the sins of all

My first thought today, sisters and brothers, has to be that of the prophet Isaiah: «The Servant of God is like a lamb led to the slaughter; he bore the iniquities of all people! We saw him, and his appearance was beyond that of mortals. He was so horrifying that people turned away from

him in disgust and in fear. He was killed as no one had ever been killed before. He was tortured beyond limits and humiliated to the depths» (Isa 53:2-4,7). Inspired by God, the prophet Isaiah anticipated by seven centuries what is happening this afternoon: the humiliation of the Lamb.

These are unparalleled words. That is why I said that instead of talking we need to love, to meditate, to behold—with repugnance if need be—what has remained of Christ's appearance. He has become like a worm that squirms in the dust of the earth, amid saliva and blood, afflicted with incredible pain, truly made an outcast of humanity. It can hardly be described, sisters and brothers. This Good Friday each one of us needs to contemplate that victim with the eyes of the soul and consider how our sins have left him. For Christ does not suffer for his own faults; Christ made himself responsible for the sins of all of us. If you want to measure the gravity of your sins, simply look at Christ crucified and say in all honesty, «I have left him like this. I killed him. To cleanse me of my filth he became filth. To cleanse me of my abominations he became abominable». The word seems almost blasphemous, but it is spoken by the Sacred Scriptures: «The one who had no sin became for our sake sin; he was cursed and punished by God» (2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13). This is Christ, the lightning rod of humanity. On him were discharged all the lightning bolts of divine anger to free us who were the ones who should have been struck down because we caused the curse each time we sinned.

It is sad, sisters and brothers, that during Holy Week we Christians do not weep with profound grief at having caused the suffering of Christ. Instead of purifying ourselves and being converted, we make Holy Week a time for more sin. As if we hadn't already loaded down the humble shoulders of the Redeemer, we continue to load sins on and offend the Lord more and more.

As we reflect on the depths of Christ's humiliation and behold him nailed to the cross, the word of God invites us to decipher the mystery that unfolds in our midst. If Christ is the representative of all the people in their pain and humiliation, then we must expose the suffering of our people who themselves are nailed to a cross. It is our crucified, tortured, spat upon, humiliated people that Jesus Christ our Lord represents, and in so doing he gives our terribly difficult situation a sense of redemption.

It is no wonder, sisters and brothers, that the people, feeling humiliated like Christ, should want to shake off their crosses, break free of the nails and the lashes, and liberate themselves. And so liberators of the people arise, but many in a false sense. On this Good Friday afternoon, sisters and brothers, as we behold the crucified Christ and also his crucified members, our sacrificed people, I want us to try to understand the meaning of the redemption that Christ is offering us in his flesh that has been blessed for our people. The key to doing this is very simple: just listen to the seven words uttered by those dying lips. They are a testimony of his spirit that he leaves us so that we can understand the ideals of Christian liberation.

Pope Paul VI has said that the church of our day cannot be indifferent to the people's desire for liberation (EN30). A church that does not feel as her own the anguish, the distress, and the suffering of the people cannot be the authentic church of redemption. But the pope, paying heed to the bishops, also described the liberation the church offers. If the church in her desire for liberation were to allow herself to be manipulated by unchristian forms of liberation based on hatred, revolution, and violence, then she would lose her strength and not be the true redemption of Jesus Christ (EN32).

The message I have, sisters and brothers, for those who sincerely and conscientiously long for a better world and a better country, for those who want to wipe away the spit from the face of our nation, for those who want to wash away the blood that stains our people is this: you must hear from the lips of the great liberator, Jesus Christ, what kind of liberation the Church and her Christians offer this nation, this world, this situation.

The seven words of Jesus on the cross

Listen to this first word of Christ: «Father, forgive them for they know not what they do» (Luke 23:34). How far the liberator is from hatred, resentment, and vengeance! He could have unleashed the forces of nature and destroyed those who crucified him. He could have freed himself and pulverized his persecutors, but he wants no violence. One day when John and James resented the ingratitude of the Samaritans who refused them lodging, they asked Jesus to send fire down upon that city. Christ told them, «You do not know what manner of spirit you are, for the Son of Man came not to destroy lives but to save them and to give his life for the salvation of all» (Luke 9:54-56; 19:10). This is Christian liberation. Christians in the church must offer their collaboration in the liberation of our people, but with an attitude of love and forgiveness modeled on Christ's plea: «Father, forgive them!» (Luke 23:34).

The second word is spoken to the good thief. The thief discovers that his companion in torture is something more than human and says to him, «Lord, remember me when you are in your kingdom». The divine crucified man turns to the thief and says, «Today you will be with me in paradise» (Luke 23:42-43). The liberator of humankind knows that paradise is not on this earth; he knows that even a man like the thief, nailed to a cross, can aspire to paradise and will reach it if he has faith. Christian liberation, sisters and brothers, is transcendent. As Christians we know that on this earth there cannot be a paradise. But this does not mean that we want to put people to sleep. Religion must not be the opium of the people. Religion is not conformity. Religion is not apathy. Rather, religion tells Christians, «Develop yourselves, lift yourselves up, and become better, but do so hoping in a paradise that exists beyond history». We do not promote a form of liberation that only waits for heaven and allows us to put up here with slavery on earth. By no means! As Christians we know that paradise must be reflected also on this earth. We must work for the establishment of a kingdom of heaven where we feel we are truly brothers and sisters and where our relationships are more human, more equal, less oppressive, and less miserable. That heaven must be reflected on this earth so that as earthly pilgrims we may be happy both here on earth and also in eternity.

The next word of Christ is a loving dialogue with his most holy Mother and his beloved disciple: «Woman, behold your son! Son, behold your mother» (John 19:26-27). Christ's liberation, sisters and brothers, is tenderness and love; it is the presence of a kind mother, Mary, who is a model for those who collaborate with Christ in liberating earth and gaining heaven. In her hymn of thanksgiving Mary proclaims the greatness of God and declares that God will reject the pride of the powerful and will exalt the humble (Luke 1:46-55). She teaches us that the road of true liberation and Christian redemption is the road of humility, the road of love, the road of commitment like her own. We are invited to love one another and discover in her the bright road that leads us to Jesus.

Christ our Lord then felt what all crucified men felt: fever, thirst, loss of blood. His jaws, desiccated by the heat, cried out in anguish, «I thirst!» (John 19:28). The liberation of Christ does not flee from the physiological anguish of humans; he feels the hunger of those who have

no food; he feels thirst; he feels the anguish of those who earn too little. The thirst of Christ, sisters and brothers, is a sign that he feels concern for the temporal anguish of those of us who are pilgrims on earth. The redemption of Christ also has to do with human development: the well-being of the throat, the stomach, the human body, housing, literacy, all the needs that make of earth the road to God. Some mystics have tried to interpret his thirst as some mysterious thirst for souls. This may be, but above all it was true thirst, thirst for water. He wanted water, but there was none for his parched lips, only gall and sour wine (John 19:29).

After that the anguish of Christ's spirit showed itself in that mysterious cry of a man who feels alone in his pain: «My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?» (Mark 15:34). When the hour of trial comes, dear brothers and sisters, when even faith seems to become dark, when hope is eclipsed, when people are left without horizons, let us not forget this Good Friday afternoon. He also felt the anguish, the mystery of being abandoned even by God; he felt himself without the love of the Father, without hope for his life. How extraordinary, brothers and sisters, that in times of anguish, torture, unjust imprisonment, and baffling situations, we turn to the Father with the trust of a child and say, «My God, why have you abandoned me?» But we do so with the certainty that God is only testing our will; he asks obedience and love to save us from our human anguish.

Christ sees that all has been fulfilled and speaks that word that sounds like the voice of creation: «It is completed!» (John 19:30). How beautiful is the life of the person who at the hour of death returns to the Father's house and is able to tell him, «All the details of my life have been a reflection of your divine will». On the other hand, how sad must be the presence of a reprobate before God, the presence of a rebel who wants to tell God, «Lord, I did not obey your laws. I thought I was free and could ignore your commandments. I wanted to seek the ways of happiness not through your laws but through my whims, my passions, my vices». How wonderful life is, sisters and brothers, when despite our trials we know that all is in accord with the Lord's will. This afternoon let us make sure that the message of Christ dying on the cross is reflected in our own lives of surrender to his most holy will.

And so the final word uttered by the Lord was one of confidence as he placed his life and death in the arms of God. From Christ's lips came once again words of filial trust: «Father, into your hands I commend my spirit!» (Luke 23:46). May we also at the hour of our death experience the presence of the Father accepting our life and our spirit. When we pass on, may we be satisfied that we have left behind on earth a struggle that was inspired in love and faith and hope, not a struggle of blood and violence! How tragic it would be, sisters and brothers, to leave in our wake people who were tortured, disappeared, killed—to leave a trail of terrorism, arson, and crimes. What reckoning before God will have to be given by those bloodstained hands that whipped and beat their sisters and brothers? How sad will it be in that hour not to be able to tell God, «Father, into your hands I commend my spirit» (Luke 23:46). How sad it will be at the time of our death if we cannot present to God a spirit that worked on earth with love and hope and faith, but only a spirit involved in bloody struggle that God wants no part of!

Christ has not died

And so before this dead body of Christ, sisters and brothers, we reflect on the second wonderful reading from Paul: «Christ has not died!» The most beautiful part of Holy Week is not this afternoon. It's true that it may be the most moving moment, for this afternoon makes clear that God for love of us became a man and for love of us let himself be killed. But what is

truly beautiful is that that death was sealed by the power of God in such a way that within three days, tomorrow night, we will sing together the victory of the resurrection, the victory of dazzling light, the flourish of God which tells us that the sacrifice of the one who bore the sins of humankind and nailed them to his cross has been accepted. Now those who want to be forgiven need only live in solidarity with the passion and death of Jesus Christ. May they understand that God will pardon them no matter how great their sins and crimes.

That's why this afternoon's precious liturgy, sisters and brothers, is a universal prayer. At this time the church feels that her heart is, like Mary's, as wide as the world, with no enemies or resentments. The church now prays for everyone: she prays for sinners, that they may be converted; she prays for those who spit on her and slander her, that they not die in disgrace and hatred but be converted and find paradise with others like the good thief who are blessed despite their past offenses. We are going to pray for rulers, God's instruments for establishing peace and justice in the world, not for trampling on human dignity. We are going to pray for those who lack faith, that they may discover the happiness Christ offers them on the bright road of faith, the happiness he bought this afternoon with his blood and his suffering. He is the High Priest, sisters and brothers, who Saint Paul tells us has passed through the heavens (Heb 4:14) and from heaven now speaks to us through the voice of this pilgrim church, showing no trace of vengeance but infinite love. He tells us how he loved us when he died on the cross and how he keeps on loving us when we follow in his footsteps. Therefore, let us pray.