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THE PASCHAL MYSTERY BECOMES OURS THROUGH BAPTISM

**Easter Vigil
Holy Saturday
25 March 1978**

*Genesis 1:1-2:2
Genesis 22:1-18
Exodus 14:15-15:1
Isaiah 54:5-14
Isaiah 55:1-11
Baruch 3:9-15, 33-4:4
Ezekiel 36:19-28
Romans 6:3-11
Matthew 28:1-10*

Dear sisters and brothers.

The word of God takes us back to the origins of the world in the first reading from Genesis and then continues on through various chapters of salvation history before culminating in the event we are commemorating tonight: the resurrection of the Lord. But this history did not end twenty centuries ago. The final chapter we are writing here right now. That is why my poor words can do little more than draw on the readings from God's word to tell you (and to remind myself) how much the Lord loves us!

At the origins of humankind God said, «Let us make man in our image and likeness» (Gen 1:26), but human beings did not maintain this dignity. Rather, they offended God by sinning and disfigured this likeness to God. And so his divine Son came to restore that image, and he consummated the work of restoration.

This evening we conclude the solemn Easter Triduum. These three days are the greatest days of the year and have given us an opportunity to consider three great aspects of our redemption: the suffering and passion of the Redeemer on Good Friday; the silent hopefulness of the tomb where the body of Christ was laid to rest; and tonight, the triumph of the resurrection. These three realities—the sorrowful death, the tomb, and the resurrection—constitute the paschal mystery.

The paschal mystery—that is, the passion, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ—is an event that we must make our own. This whole history-defining episode of Christ's life would have been in vain if we did not make it part of our lives. This is the meaning of this night: that sorrowful passion, that expectant tomb, and that triumph we commemorate tonight have all been made ours through baptism.

In a short while we are going to renew our baptism because these three dimensions of the paschal mystery which brought about our redemption have marked our lives from that moment when our parents carried us to the baptismal font—just as in former times the catechumens were brought forward on Holy Saturday night to be baptized and confirmed. Saint Paul has just explained to us the meaning of Christian baptism: being buried with Christ and rising with Christ (Rom 6:4). When we reflect on modern men and women, sisters and brothers, we see how these three aspects of the Passover of Christ relate to the life of people today.

The suffering and the passion of the Redeemer on Good Friday

First, consider the sorrowful passion of Christ. People today run away from pain; they don't want suffering. Nevertheless, no one is more convinced than modern people that pain and death are invincible. Despite all the advances in medicine and the alleviation of suffering, pain still reigns supreme. Suffering is the human heritage whether we like it or not. The secret, then, lies in giving meaning to that suffering. What baptism does is take human beings with all their tragedy and all their pain and convert the suffering of their lives—their hunger, their marginalization, their pain—into redemptive suffering along with Christ.

This evening we are able offer the divine risen One all our suffering by incorporating it into his glorious wounds. Of all the faithful filling this cathedral and all those reflecting with us on the radio this holy night, who does not have suffering? What Christian does not carry some problem of conscience? Tonight Christ invites us to unite all our own sufferings to his passion and cross so that they may be divinized, being illuminated with the light and filled with the hope of Easter. On this night, sisters and brothers, the best gift we can bring for the divine risen One is our own suffering so that, united to his resurrection, it becomes the pain of redemption.

The silence of the tomb, the hope of the grave

The second aspect of the Passover is the burial of Holy Saturday. The tomb is silent but not passive, because our faith tells us that while the body of Christ rested in his tomb from Good Friday afternoon until tonight, the blessed soul of Christ was at work.

It was Palm Sunday on the other side of history. After Christ passed through the painful tunnel of death, his soul was there with the blessed souls of the Old Testament. There he was with Adam and Eve, Abraham, David, the patriarchs, the prophets, all the noble and holy people who lived before Christ but could not enter heaven because it had been closed by human sin. That heaven was now open again! As our Creed tells us, «Christ descended into hell»; that is, he descended to the realm of the dead, and the quarters of death were filled with light. It was Palm Sunday also for the people of the Old Testament, who together with the risen Christ formed a procession of spirits who accompany him everywhere and enter with him into the kingdom of heaven. Christ has come to redeem all people, not only those born after him, but those who lived before him in the hope of resurrection.

The silent tomb is a sign of our hope. On this Easter night the tomb becomes an empty grave and the greatest monument to Christian hope. We will also die; we will succumb to the onslaught of pain and death; we will grow old. Will this be reason to say that Christ's redemption was ineffective? By no means! It simply means that in Christ's redemption there is

a definitive phase which is his divine person. He has triumphed completely, but the human race must still keep living with hope. Hope is vital for us.

Sisters and brothers, in these times when history seems to be running into a dead end, hope still brightens the horizon of Christians. It appears that in the tomb of Christ the Lord's enemies have sealed their victory, but on this very night the seals and chains placed on it by his enemies are broken, and the tomb cries out, «O death, where is your victory!» (1 Cor 15:55). Just as the tomb of Christ breaks the padlocks of death, so too the tombs of our loved ones and our own tombs will one day be emptied.

We need to nourish this hope, sisters and brothers, especially during these hours when many people are trying to resolve our political, social, and economic problems by organizing earthly forces and using only worldly means. Redemption tells us that our true liberation is the fruit of the triumphant Christ and of the hope we place in him. The greater our problems, the more opportunity we are giving the Redeemer and the greater must be our hope. This is the night of hope, the night of Easter, the night of the empty tomb!

The triumph of the resurrection

And so we come, sisters and brothers, to the third phase of the paschal mystery: the triumph. This is a night of triumph, a night of victory, but not a victory that leaves the enemies crushed under hatred and bloodshed. The victories achieved by bloodshed are detestable. The victories won by brute force are brutish. The victory that truly triumphs is that of faith, the victory of Christ who did not come to be served but to serve (Matt 20:28). The triumph of his love is a peaceful triumph. Death's triumph was not definitive. The definitive victory is the triumph of life over death, the triumph of peace, the triumph of joy, the triumph of the alleluias, the triumph of the resurrection of the Lord!

But I repeat: in this triumph, sisters and brothers, there are two aspects, two phases. Don't forget that. The first phase is Christ's, and he is already crowned with absolute victory; he is the king of life and of eternity. Saint Paul just told us, «Christ has risen, and death has no hold on him» (Rom 6:9). In him redemption has reached its peak. But tonight we are going to renew our baptism as Christians, and we know that for us the victory still lies ahead as the object of our hope. The banners of suffering and pain and sin and death are still raised over our world. This does not mean that Christ's death and resurrection were a failure because of human wickedness; it just means that this is the time of the church. From the resurrection of Christ until the second coming how many centuries will pass? We do not know, but we do know that with the resurrection of Christ the victory over sin and hell and death has been guaranteed and that God has asked his church to administer this victory of Christ in the hearts of every person. That is the reason for this tremendous work of evangelization, the labor of reconciling people with God, the work of bringing the blood of Christ to the hearts of all, the work of planting the love of God in the midst of hatred, the work of sowing peace among the nations, the work of promoting justice in human relationships and respect for the rights of those sanctified by the Lord's redemption.

These labors of the church suppose bloody struggles and painful conflicts, but they are part of the Passover of Christ, a Passover that will not be completed until Christ returns again. This night presents the church waiting for the dawn. You heard the words of the Easter proclamation singing the glory of this beautiful paschal candle that we have lit in the midst of

this assembly, this thick candle with a cross as its mark of glory. This candle is a symbol of Christ; it is the church illuminating the night with the light of Christ. The deacon sang, «May the night remain bright until the morning light announces that now there is no need for this candle. It is day! The brilliance of the new day illuminates the people who continue their pilgrimage here on earth». This candle represents the church; as long as there is night, she will burn brightly until the first light of morning, when Christ returns. We still cannot see the splendor of the glory of the risen Christ, but through the church he is preaching, forgiving, sanctifying, and guiding the souls of those who allow themselves to be led.

Therefore, sisters and brothers, we are going to conclude this Liturgy of the Word with the renewal of our baptismal commitment. We are going to bless the water that will be used to baptize the children, the font in which we also were incorporated into this paschal mystery. This night is beautiful not only because Christ has risen above pain and death but because this tomb and this victory have become ours, thanks to the baptism instituted by Christ so that all those born of flesh may by baptism become incorporated into him and thus become children of the redemption and candidates for eternal glory and victory. Let it be so.