

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 19 April 2000

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. The Lenten journey we began on Ash Wednesday reaches its culmination during this Week which is appropriately called "Holy". In the days ahead we are preparing to celebrate the most sacred events of our salvation: the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ.

The Cross stands before us in these days as an eloquent symbol of God's love for humanity. At the same time the dying Redeemer's entreaty rings out in the liturgy: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Mt 27: 46; Mk 15: 34). We often feel this cry of suffering as *"our own"* in the painful situations of life which can cause deep distress and give rise to worry and uncertainty. In moments of loneliness and bewilderment, which are not unusual in human life, a believer's heart can exclaim: the Lord has abandoned me!

However, Christ's Passion and his glorification on the tree of the Cross offer a different key for reading these events. On Golgotha the Father, at the height of his Only-begotten Son's sacrifice, does not abandon him, but brings to completion his plan of salvation for all humanity. In his Passion, Death and Resurrection, we are shown that the last word in human existence is not death but God's victory over death. Divine love, manifested in its fullness in the paschal mystery, overcomes death and sin, which is its cause (cf. *Rom 5: 12*).

2. In these days of Holy Week, we enter into the heart of God's saving plan. The Church, especially during this Jubilee Year, wishes to remind everyone that Christ died for every man and woman, because the gift of salvation is universal. The Church shows the face of a crucified God, who does not frighten but communicates only love and mercy. One cannot be indifferent to Christ's sacrifice! Feelings of deep gratitude spontaneously arise in the minds of those who pause to contemplate the Lord's Passion. By ascending Calvary in spirit with him, in a certain way we can experience the light and joy that radiate from his Resurrection.

We relive all this, with God's help, in the Easter Triduum. Through the eloquence of the rites of Holy Week, the liturgy will show us the unbreakable continuity between the Passion and the Resurrection. Christ's Death already holds within itself the seed of the Resurrection.

3. The prelude to the Easter Triduum will be the celebration of the Chrism Mass tomorrow morning, Holy Thursday, when priests will gather around their respective Pastors in diocesan cathedrals. The oils of the sick and of catechumens are blessed, and chrism consecrated for the administration of the sacraments. A rite rich in meaning, it will be accompanied by the equally significant renewal of priestly commitments and promises by the priests. It is the day of priests, which every year prompts us, the ministers of the Church, to rediscover the value and meaning of our priesthood, a gift and mystery of love.

In the evening we will relive the institution of the Eucharist, the sacrament of God's infinite love for humanity. Judas betrays Christ; Peter, despite all his avowals, denies him; at the moment of the Passion, the other Apostles disappear. Few stay with him. Yet it is to these weak men that the Lord entrusts his testament, offering himself in his Body given and his Blood poured out for the life of the world (cf. *Jn 6: 51*). An unfathomable mystery of

condescension and goodness!

On Good Friday the account of the Passion will be heard again, and we will be invited to venerate the Cross, the extraordinary symbol of divine mercy. To man, so often uncertain in distinguishing good from evil, the crucified Christ shows us the only way to give meaning to human life. It is the way of total acceptance of God's will and the generous gift of self to one's brothers and sisters.

On Holy Saturday, a day of deep liturgical silence, we will pause to reflect on the meaning of these events. The Church will vigilantly watch with Mary, the Sorrowful Mother, and wait with her for the dawning of the Resurrection. In fact, at daybreak on the "first day of the week", the silence will be broken by the joyful Easter message, proclaimed in the festive hymn of the *Exsultet* during the solemn liturgy of the Easter Vigil. Christ's triumph over death will move, with the tombstone, the minds and hearts of the faithful and flood them with the same joy felt by Mary Magdalen, the devout women, the Apostles and everyone to whom the risen Christ revealed himself on Easter Day.

4. Dear brothers and sisters, let us open our hearts and intensely live this Sacred Triduum. Let us immerse ourselves in the grace of these holy days, and as the holy Bishop Athanasius once urged: *"Let us also follow the Lord, that is, let us imitate him, and thus we will find the way to celebrate the feast not only outwardly, but in the most effective way, that is, not only with words but also with deeds"* (*Paschal Letters, Let. 14, 2*).

With these sentiments, I wish all of you and your loved ones a fruitful Sacred Triduum and a joyful Easter of the Lord's Resurrection.

I am pleased to welcome the many young people present at today's audience. I pray that your visit will be a time of particular closeness to Christ and that you will be renewed in your faith and Christian witness. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from Ireland, Sweden and the United States, I invoke the joy and peace of the Risen Saviour. To all of you, a Happy Easter!

