



The Holy See

VISIT TO THE ROMAN PARISH OF "SANTA CROCE IN GERUSALEMME"

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

25 March 1979

1. Today the Pope comes to visit the parish whose church has the title of Holy Cross in Jerusalem and is one of the Lenten Stations. Thanks to this fact we can refer to the Lenten traditions of Rome. These traditions, in which the whole Catholic Church participated indirectly, were linked with the individual sanctuaries of ancient Rome, at which the faithful, clergy, and Bishops met every day during Lent. In a spirit of repentance, they visited the places sanctified by the blood of the martyrs and by the prayerful memory of the People of God. Precisely on the fourth Sunday of Lent the Lenten Station was celebrated in this sanctuary, in which we now find ourselves. As a result of the circumstances of modern life, and of the great territorial development of Rome, it is necessary to visit during Lent rather the parishes lying in the new districts of the city.

Today's Sunday liturgy begins with the word: *Laetare*—"Rejoice!", that is, with the call to spiritual joy. I rejoice because, this Sunday too, I have the happiness of finding myself in a place sanctified by the tradition of so many generations, the sanctuary of the Holy Cross, which is today the Lenten Station and, at the same time, is your parish church.

2. I come here to worship in spirit, together with you, the mystery of the Cross of the Lord. Christ's talk to Nicodemus, which we read again in the Gospel today, directs us to this mystery. Jesus has before him a scribe, one learned in the Scripture, a member of the Sanhedrin and, at the same time, a man of good will. Therefore he decides to start him on the way to the mystery of the Cross. He recalls in the first place, therefore, that Moses in the wilderness lifted up the bronze serpent during Israel's forty years' wandering from Egypt to the Promised Land. When some one who had been bitten by a serpent in the wilderness looked at that sign, he remained alive (cf. Num 21:4-9). This sign, which was the bronze serpent, heralded another Elevation: "The Son of man", Jesus even says, "must be lifted up", and here he is speaking of the elevation on the Cross—"that

whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (Jn 3: 14-15). The Cross: no longer just the figure that heralds, but the very Reality of salvation!

And here, Christ explains thoroughly the meaning of the Cross to his interlocutor, who is amazed but at the same time ready to listen and to continue the talk: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

The Cross is a new revelation of God. It is the definitive revelation. Along the way of human thought about God, along the way of understanding God, a radical change takes place. Nicodemus, a noble and honest man and at the same time a follower and expert on the Old Testament, must have felt an interior shock. For the whole of Israel, God was above all Majesty and Justice. He was considered as a judge, who rewards and punishes. The God, of whom Jesus speaks, is the God who sends his own Son "not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 3:17). He is the God of love, the Father who does not draw back before the sacrifice of his Son in order to save man.

3. St Paul, with his eyes fixed on the same revelation of God, today repeats twice in the letter to the Ephesians: "by grace you have been saved" (Eph 2:5). "By grace you have been saved through faith" (Eph 2:8). Yet this Paul, just like Nicodemus, was until his conversion the man of the Ancient Law. On the way to Damascus Christ revealed himself to him, and from that moment Paul understood of God what he proclaims today: "...God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us. even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (Eph 2:45).

What is Grace? "It is a gift of God." The gift that is explained with his Love. The gift is where there is love. And Love is revealed by means of the Cross. This is what Jesus said to Nicodemus. Love, which is revealed by means of the Cross, is precisely Grace. God's innermost face is revealed in it. He is not just the judge. He is the God of infinite majesty and extreme justice. He is the Father who wishes the world to be saved and to understand the meaning of the Cross. This is greater eloquence than the meaning of the Law and the penalty. It is the word which speaks to human consciences in a different way. It is the word which obliges in a different way from the words of the Law and the threat of the penalty. To understand this word it is necessary to become a changed man. The man of Grace and Truth. Grace is a binding gift! The Gift of the Living God, which commits man to the new life! And it is just this in which that judgment, of which Christ also speaks to Nicodemus, consists: the Cross saves and at the same time judges. It judges differently. It judges more deeply. "For everyone who does evil hates the light"... just that stupendous light that comes from the Cross!... But he who does what is true comes to the light" (Jn 3:20-21). He comes to the Cross. He submits to the requirements of grace. He wants to be bound by that unutterable gift of God. He wants it to form his whole life. This man feels in the Cross the voice of God who addresses his sons on this earth of ours, in the same way as he once spoke to the exiles of Israel through Cyrus, King of Persia, with the invocation of hope. The Cross is the invocation of hope.

4. Gathered at this Lenten Station of Christ's Cross, we must ask ourselves these fundamental questions which flow to us from the Cross. What have we done and what are we doing in order to know God better? This God, who revealed Christ to us. Who is he for us? What place does he occupy in our consciousness, in our life?

Let us question ourselves about this place, because so many factors and so many circumstances take away from God this place in us. Has God not already become for us just marginal? Has his name not been covered in our soul with a lot of other words? Has it not been trodden underfoot, like that seed which "fell along the path" (Mk 4:4)? Have we not inwardly renounced redemption by means of the Cross of Christ, putting in its place other purely temporal, partial, and superficial programmes?

5. The Sanctuary of the Holy Cross is a place in which we must ask ourselves these fundamental questions. The Parish is a community, reanimated by the Cross of Christ.

What are we to say about our parish Community?

I hope that, alive and active since 1910, it will always pulsate with Christian life, fecundated by fervent and assiduous presence at the sacraments of the Eucharist and of Reconciliation; that, enlightened by continual catechesis, at all levels, for deeper study of the Word of God and for knowledge of Jesus Christ, it will express itself in active and generous dedication to brothers who need our work and our affection in any way.

Taking the opportunity from this visit today, which is at the same time a pilgrimage to the Sanctuary of the Cross of Christ, I unite with all of you present here.

I wish to unite with the parish priest, to whose zeal and responsibility is entrusted this portion of the People of God; with the priests who collaborate with him in the parish apostolate; with the Monastic Community of the Cistercians, who bring the spirit of St Bernard to life again in prayer and sacrifice. I unite with the fathers and mothers, who give themselves with exemplary abnegation for the good of their children. I unite with young men and women, who wish to make their contribution of ideas and industry for the growth of a better society. I unite with youngsters and children, who make this world joyful with their natural innocence. I unite with the Sisters who carry out their apostolate within the parish: the Apostles of the Sacred Heart, the Daughters of Our Lady at Mount Calvary, the Sisters of the Catholic Apostolate, the Carmelite Sisters, the Daughters of Our Lady of Purity, the Sisters Adorers of the Precious Blood, the Sisters of St Joseph, the Sisters of the Poor of St Vincent, the Franciscan Tertiary Sisters of All Saints, the Sisters Daughters of Mercy, the Daughters of the Sacred Heart, the Cistercian Oblate Sisters of Charity. But, in particular, I unite with the poor, the sick, the old, with all those suffering loneliness, incomprehension, rejection, hunger for affection; and I ask them to unite with Christ hanging on the Cross, and to offer their sufferings for the Church and for the Pope.

And let us humbly confess our faults, our shortcomings, our indifference with regard to this Love which was revealed on the Cross. And at the same time let us renew ourselves in the spirit with the great desire for Life, the Life of Grace, which continually raises man, strengthens him, commits him. That grace which gives our existence on earth its full dimension.

Amen.

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