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APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

**EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION FOR THE FAITHFUL
OF THE ECCLESIASTICAL PROVINCE OF LOS ANGELES**

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

*Coliseum, Los Angeles
Tuesday, 15 September 1987*

"And you yourself shall be pierced with a sword" (Luc. 2, 35).

Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, and of the Dioceses of Orange, San Diego, San Bernardino and Fresno,

1. The Church's meditation today focuses on the sufferings of Mary, the Mother standing at the foot of her Son's Cross. This *brings to completion* yesterday's feast of the Triumph of the Cross. Jesus had said, "once I am lifted up, I will draw all men to myself" (*Io. 12, 32*). These words were fulfilled when he was "lifted up" *on the Cross*.

The Church, which constantly lives this mystery, feels very deeply the suffering of the Mother on Golgotha. The agony of the Son who in his terrible pain entrusts the whole world to his Father - that agony is united with the agony in the heart of the Mother there on Calvary. Today's Gospel reminds us that, when Jesus was only forty days old, *Simeon* had foretold this agony in the heart of the Mother when he said: "And you yourself shall be pierced with a sword" (*Luc. 2, 35*).

The entire *mystery of obedience to the Father* is encompassed by the Son's agony: "he humbled himself, obediently accepting even death, death on a cross" (*Phil. 2, 8*), as yesterday's liturgy proclaimed. And today we read in the Letter to the Hebrews: "In the days when he was in the

flesh, (Christ) offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to God, who was able to save him from death" (*Hebr. 5, 7*). These words have special application to the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prayed: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by" (*Matth. 26, 39-42*). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews immediately adds that Christ "was heard because of his reverence" (*Hebr. 5, 7*). Yes he was heard. He had said, "not as I will but as you will" (*Matth. 26, 39*). And so it came to pass.

The agony of Christ was, and still is, the mystery of his obedience to the Father. *At Gethsemane. On Calvary.* "Son though he was", the text continues, "he learned obedience from what he suffered" (*Hebr. 5, 8*). This includes Christ's obedience even unto death—the perfect sacrifice of Redemption. "And when perfected, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (*Ibid. 5, 9*).

2. As we celebrate Our Lady of Sorrows during this Marian Year, let us call to mind the teaching of the Second Vatican Council concerning the presence of Mary, the Mother of God, in the mystery of Christ and of the Church. Let us recall in particular the following words: "The Blessed Virgin advanced in her *pilgrimage of faith*, and loyally persevered in her union with her Son unto the Cross, where she stood, in keeping with the divine plan" (*Lumen Gentium, 58*).

Mary's pilgrimage of faith! It is precisely at the foot of the Cross that this pilgrimage of faith, which began at the Annunciation, *reaches its high point*, its culmination. There it is united with the agony of Mary's maternal heart. "Suffering grievously with her only-begotten Son... she lovingly consented to the immolation of this Victim which she herself had brought forth" (*Ibid.*). At the same time, the agony of her maternal heart also represents a fulfilment of the words of Simeon: "And you yourself shall be pierced with a sword" (*Luc. 2, 33*). Surely these prophetic words express *the "divine plan"* by which Mary is destined to stand at the foot of the Cross.

3. Today's liturgy makes use of the ancient poetic text of the sequence which begins with the Latin words *Stabat Mater*:

By the Cross of our salvation
 Mary stood in desolation
 While the Saviour hung above.
 All her human powers failing,
 Sorrow's sword, at last prevailing,
 Stabs and breaks her heart of love . . .
 Virgin Mary, full of sorrow,
 Love enough to share your pain.
 Make my heart to burn with fire,
 Make Christ's love my one desire,
 Who for love of me was slain.

The author of this sequence sought, in the most eloquent way humanly possible, to present *the "compassion" of the Mother* at the foot of the Cross. He was inspired by those words of Sacred Scripture about the sufferings of Mary which, though few and concise, are deeply moving.

It is appropriate that *Mary's song of praise*, the *Magnificat*, should also find a place in our celebration: "My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord... for he has looked upon his servant in her lowliness... God who is mighty has done great things for me... his mercy is from age to age . . . even as he promised our fathers, Abraham and his descendants forever" (*Luc. 1, 46-55*).

Can we not suppose that these words, which reflect the fervour and exultation of the young mother's heart, still ring true at the foot of the Cross, that they still reveal her heart now that she finds herself in agony with her Son? Humanly speaking, it does not seem possible to us. However, within the fullness of divine truth, the words of the *Magnificat* actually *find their ultimate meaning* in the light of Christ's Paschal Mystery, from the Cross through the Resurrection.

It is precisely in this Paschal Mystery that the "great things" which God who is mighty has done for Mary find their *perfect fulfilment*, not only for her, but for all of us and for all of humanity. It is precisely at the foot of the Cross that the promise is fulfilled which God once made to Abraham and to his descendants, the people of the Old Covenant. It is also at the foot of the Cross that there is an overflow of *the mercy* shown to humanity from generation to generation by him whose name is holy.

Yes, at the foot of the Cross, the "humility of the Lord's servant" - the one upon whom "God has looked" (Cfr. *ibid.* 1, 48) - reaches its full measure together with the absolute humiliation of the Son of God. But from that same spot *the "blessing" of Mary by "all ages to come"* also begins. There, at the foot of the Cross - to use the description of the prophet Isaiah in the first reading - the Virgin of Nazareth is fully "clothed with a robe of salvation" (Cfr. *Is.* 61, 10): she whom already at the Annunciation the Archangel hailed as "full of grace" (*Luc.* 1, 28); she who was redeemed in the most perfect manner; she who was conceived without stain in view of the merits of her Son. At the price of the Cross. In virtue of Christ's Paschal Mystery.

4. Dear brothers and sisters of Los Angeles and southern California: it is a joy for me to celebrate this liturgy today with you. California has been a symbol of hope and promise for millions of people who continue to come here to make a home for themselves and their families. Today the people of California play *a major role in shaping the culture of the United States*, which has such a profound influence on the rest of the world. Your State also leads in research and technology designed to improve the quality of human life and to transcend the limitations which impede human freedom and progress.

Yet amid the many blessings that you enjoy within this beautiful and prosperous State, I know that the mention of Mary as a Mother of sorrows and suffering still strikes a responsive chord in your

hearts. This is because all of us, in some way, experience *sorrow and suffering in our lives*. No amount of economic, scientific or social progress can eradicate our vulnerability to sin and to death. On the contrary, progress creates new possibilities for evil as well as for good. Technology, for example, increases what we can do, but it cannot teach us the right thing to do. It increases our choices, but it is we who must choose between evil and good. Besides moral suffering, physical and emotional sufferings are part of every human life. The Gospel message is certainly no enemy of human progress or of the promoting of our temporal welfare, but neither does the Paschal Mystery allow us to run away from human sorrow and suffering.

5. The message of the crucified Son and of his Mother at the foot of the Cross is that the mysteries of suffering, love, and Redemption are inseparably joined together. In bitterness and alienation from God and our fellow human beings we will never find the answer to the question - the "why?" of suffering. Calvary teaches us that we will find an answer only *through the "obedience"* mentioned in the Letter to the Hebrews. It is not obedience to a cruel or unjust god of our own making, but obedience to the God who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (*Io.* 3, 16). Jesus prayed: "not as I will, but as you will... your will be done" (*Matth.* 26, 39. 42). And Mary began her pilgrimage of faith with the words, "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say" (*Luc.* 1, 38).

Looking upon the suffering Son and Mother in the light of Scripture, we cannot equate their obedience with fatalism or passivity. Indeed, the Gospel is *the negation of passivity* in the face of suffering (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Salvifici Doloris*, 30). What we find is a loving act of self-giving on the part of Christ for the salvation of the world, and on the part of Mary as an active participant from the beginning in the saving mission of her Son. When we have striven to alleviate or overcome suffering, when like Christ we have prayed that "the cup pass us by" (Cfr. *Matth.* 26-39), and yet suffering remains, then we must walk "the royal road" of the Cross. As I mentioned before, Christ's answer to our question "why" is above all *a call, a vocation*. Christ does not give us an abstract answer, but rather he says, "Follow me!" He offers us the opportunity through suffering to take part in his own work of saving the world. And when we do take up our cross, then gradually the salvific meaning of suffering is revealed to us. It is then that in our sufferings we find inner peace and even spiritual joy (Cfr. Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Salvifici Doloris*, 26).

The Letter to the Hebrews also speaks of being made perfect through suffering (Cfr. *Hebr.* 5, 8-10). This is because the purifying flames of trial and sorrow have the power *to transform us from within* by unleashing our love, teaching us compassion for others, and thus drawing us closer to Christ. Next to her Son, Mary is the most perfect example of this. It is precisely in being the Mother of Sorrows that she is a mother to each one of us and to all of us. The spiritual sword that pierces her heart opens up a river of compassion for all who suffer.

6. My dear brothers and sisters: as we celebrate this Marian Year in preparation for the third millennium of Christianity, let us join the Mother of God in her pilgrimage of faith. Let us learn *the*

virtue of compassion from her whose heart was pierced with a sword at the foot of the Cross. It is the virtue that prompted the Good Samaritan to stop beside the victim on the road, rather than to continue on or to cross over to the other side. Whether it be the case of the person next to us or of distant peoples and nations, we must be Good Samaritans to all those who suffer. We must be the compassionate "neighbour" of those in need, not only when it is emotionally rewarding or convenient, but also when it is demanding and inconvenient (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Salvifici Doloris*, 28-30). Compassion is a virtue we cannot neglect in a world in which the human suffering of so many of our brothers and sisters is needlessly increased by oppression, deprivation and underdevelopment-by poverty, hunger and disease. Compassion is also called for in the face of the spiritual emptiness and aimlessness that people can often experience amid material prosperity and comfort in developed countries such as your own. Compassion is a virtue that brings healing to those who bestow it, not only in this present life but in eternity: "Blessed are they who show mercy, mercy shall be theirs" (*Matth. 5, 7*).

7. Through the faith of Mary, then, let us fix our gaze on *the mystery of Christ*. The mystery of the Son of Man, written in the earthly history of humanity, is at the same time the definitive manifestation of God in that history.

Simeon says: "This child is destined to be the downfall and the rise of many in Israel, a sign that will be opposed" (*Luc. 2, 34*). How profound these words are! How far down these words reach into the history of man! Into the history of us all: Christ is destined for the ruin and the resurrection of many! Christ is a sign of contradiction! Is this not also true in our time? In our age? *In our generation?*

And standing next to Christ is Mary. To her Simeon says: "... so that the thoughts of many hearts may be laid bare. And you yourself shall be pierced with a sword" (*Luc. 2, 35*).

Today we ask for *humility of heart* and for a clear conscience:
before God
through Christ.

Yes, we ask that the thoughts of our hearts may be laid bare. We ask that our *consciences may be pure*:
before God
through the Cross of Christ
in the heart of Mary. Amen.

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