



The Holy See

1. During Lent, the Church, referring to the words of Christ, to the teaching of the Old Testament prophets, and to her own centuries-old tradition, urges us to particular solidarity with all those who are suffering and experiencing, in any way, poverty, want, injustice, persecution. We spoke about it last Wednesday, continuing our Lenten reflections on the present-day meaning of penitence, which is expressed through prayer, fasting, and almsdeeds. The exhortation to solidarity, on behalf of Christ, with all the tribulations and necessities of our brothers, and not only with those who enter the radius of our eye and our hand, but with all, even with the cries of tormented souls and bodies, is almost the very essence of living spiritually the period of Lent in the existence of the Church. In the last week of Lent—after this preparation (and only after it!)—the Church exhorts us *to special and exceptional solidarity with suffering Christ himself*. Although awareness of Christ's passion accompanies us throughout all the weeks of this period, this week alone, however, unique in the full sense of the word, is the week of the Lord's Passion. It is Holy Week. The call to special and exceptional solidarity with suffering Christ is felt towards the end of the Lenten period. It is felt when the attitude of spiritual conversion, and especially the sense of solidarity with all our suffering brothers, has already matured in us. This corresponds to the logic of the revelation: love of God is the first and greatest commandment, but it cannot be fulfilled outside love of man. It cannot be fulfilled without it.² At the same time *the deepest and most powerful impulses of love* must spring from this Week, in which we are called to a special and exceptional, solidarity with Christ, in his passion and death on the Cross. "For God so loved the world"—man in the world—"that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3:16). He gave him to suffering and death. Contemplating this revelation of love, which starts from God and goes towards man in the world, we cannot stop, but must take "the way back": the way of the human heart which goes towards God, the way of love. Lent—and above all Holy Week—must be, in every year of our life in the Church, a new beginning of this "way of love". Lent is identified, as we see, with the culminating point of the revelation of God's love for man. Therefore the Church exhorts us to linger in a quite, special and exceptional way beside Christ, alone near him. She exhorts us to endeavour—like St Paul—(at least in this week) to "*Know nothing... except Jesus Christ and him crucified*" (1 Cor 2:2). The Church addresses this exhortation to everyone: not just to the whole community of believers to all followers of Christ, but also to all the others. To stop before Christ who is suffering, to find solidarity with him in oneself again—this is the duty and need of every human heart, this is the verification of human sensitivity. Man's nobility is manifested in this. *Holy Week* is therefore *the time of the Church's greatest opening to humanity* and at the same time the peak time of *evangelization*: through everything that

the Church thinks and says of Christ in these days, through the way in which she lives his passion and death, through her solidarity with him, the Church returns, year after year, to the very roots of her mission and her proclamation of salvation. And if in this Holy Week the Church, more than speaking, is silent, she does so in order that *Christ himself* can speak all the more. That Christ whom Pope Paul VI called "the very first and the greatest evangelizer" (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 7).3. Evangelization is carried out with the help of words. And *just the words spoken by Christ during his passion* have an enormous force of expression. It can also be said that they are a place for a special meeting with every man; they are the opportunity and the reason to manifest great solidarity. How often do we return to what the Evangelists recorded as the guiding thread of Christ's prayer in the garden of Olives? "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" (Mt 26:39). Does not every man say so? Does not every man feel like this in suffering, in tribulation, before the cross?: "Let it pass from me..." How much deep human truth is contained in this sentence! Christ, as a real man, felt aversion to suffering: "He began to be sorrowful and troubled" (Mt 26:37) and said: "Let it pass from me..."; let it not come, let it not reach me! It is necessary to accept the whole human expression, the whole human truth of these words, in order to be able to unite them with those of Christ: "If it is possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt!" (Mt 26:39). Every man, confronted by suffering, is *faced with a challenge*... Is this only a challenge of fate? Christ gives the answer, saying: "As thou wilt". He does not address fate, a "blind fate". He speaks to God. To the Father. Sometimes this answer is not enough for us, because it is not the last word, but the first. We cannot understand either Gethsemane or Calvary unless *in the context of the whole paschal event*. Of the whole mystery. 4. In the words of Christ's passion there is a particularly intense *meeting* of the "human" with the "divine". The Gethsemane words already show this. Later on Christ will rather be silent. He will say a sentence to Judas. Then to those brought by Judas to the garden of Gethsemane to arrest Him. Then again to Peter. Before the Sanhedrin he does not defend himself, but bears witness. And so also before Pilate. Before Herod, on the other hand, "he made no answer" (Lk 23:9). During the infliction of the sentence, the words of Isaiah come true: "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth" (Is 53:7). His last *words fall from the cross*. They can be explained as a whole by the course of the event, by the horrible torture and, at the same time, through them, in spite of their brevity and conciseness, there appears what is "divine" and "salvific". We feel the "salvific" significance of the words addressed to his Mother, to John, to the good thief, as also the words referring to the crucifiers. The last words addressed to the Father are overwhelming: the last echo and at the same time almost the continuation of the Gethsemane prayer. Christ says: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46), repeating the Psalmist's words (cf. Psalm 21 (22) 1). At Gethsemane he had said: "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me" (Mt 26:39). And now, from the cross, he has publicly confirmed that *the "cup" has not been removed*, that he must drink it to the dregs. Such is the Father's will. In fact, this last word: "It is finished" (Jn 19:30) is an echo of the Gethsemane prayer. And, finally, only these: "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit" (Lk 23:46). Christ's agony. First the moral agony at Gethsemane. Then the agony, at once moral and physical, on the cross. No one has expressed so deeply as Christ the human torment of dying, just because he was the Son

of God; because in him the "human" and the "divine" constituted a mysterious unity. Therefore also those words of Christ's passion, so penetratingly human, will remain for ever a revelation of the "divinity" which in Christ is bound up with humanity, in the fullness of personal unity. It can be said: the death of God-Man was necessary, in order that we, heirs to original sin, might see what the drama in man's death is. In this Holy Week, we must arrive at a special solidarity with suffering, crucified and dying Christ, in order to find again in our lives the closeness of what is "divine" and what is "human". God decided to speak to us with the language of *love* which is *stronger than death*. Let us welcome this message.

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