



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St Peter's Square

Wednesday, 4 April 2007

The Easter Triduum

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As the Lenten journey which began with Ash Wednesday nears its end, today's liturgy for Wednesday of Holy Week already introduces us into the dramatic atmosphere of the coming days, steeped in the memory of the Passion and death of Christ. In fact, in today's liturgy, the Evangelist Matthew presents for our meditation the brief dialogue between Jesus and Judas that took place in the Upper Room.

"Is it I, Master?" the traitor asked the divine Teacher, who had foretold: "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me". The Lord's answer was incisive: "You have said so" (cf. *Mt* 26: 14-25).

For his part, John concludes the narrative announcing Judas' betrayal with a few portentous words: "It was night" (*Jn* 13: 30).

When the traitor left the Upper Room, thick darkness gathered in his heart - it was an inner night -, bewilderment increased in the hearts of the other disciples - they too were moving towards night -, while the steadily darkening twilight of abandonment and hatred hung over the Son of Man who was preparing to consummate his sacrifice on the Cross.

What we shall be commemorating in the coming days is the supreme battle between Light and Darkness, between Life and Death. We must also put ourselves in this context aware of our own "night", of our sins and our responsibility if we want to benefit spiritually from the Paschal Mystery, if we want our hearts to be enlightened through this Mystery which constitutes the central fulcrum

of our faith.

The beginning of the *Easter Triduum* is Holy Thursday, tomorrow. During the Chrism Mass, which can be considered the prelude to the Sacred Triduum, the diocesan Bishop and his closest collaborators, the priests, surrounded by the People of God, renew the promises they made on the day of priestly Ordination.

Year after year, this is an intense moment of ecclesial communion that highlights the gift of the ministerial priesthood which Christ bequeathed to his Church on the eve of his death on the Cross. And for every priest it is a moving moment in this vigil of the Passion in which the Lord gave himself to us, gave us the Sacrament of the Eucharist, gave us the priesthood. It is a day that touches all our hearts.

The Oils for the celebration of the Sacraments are then blessed: the Oil of the Catechumens, the Oil of the Sick and the Holy Chrism.

In the evening, entering the Easter Triduum, the Christian community relives what happened at the Last Supper in the *Mass of the Lord's Supper*. In the Upper Room, the Redeemer wanted to anticipate the sacrifice of his life in the Sacrament of the bread and wine changed into his Body and Blood: he anticipated his death, he freely gave his life, he offered the definitive gift of himself to humanity.

With the washing of the feet, the gesture with which, having loved his own, he loved them to the end is repeated (cf. *Jn* 13: 1), and he bequeathed this act of humility to his disciples as their "badge": love unto death.

After the Mass of the Lord's Supper, the liturgy invites the faithful to pause in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, reliving Jesus' agony in Gethsemane. And we see that the disciples fell asleep, leaving their Lord on his own.

Today too, we, his disciples, are often asleep. On this holy night of Gethsemane, let us be vigilant, not wanting to leave the Lord on his own at this time; thus, we can better understand the mystery of Holy Thursday, which embraces the supreme, threefold gift of the ministry of the Priesthood, the Eucharist and the new Commandment of Love (*agape*).

Good Friday, which commemorates the events between Christ's condemnation to death and his Crucifixion, is a day of penance, fasting and prayer, of participation in the Lord's Passion. At the prescribed hour, the Christian Assembly, with the help of the Word of God and liturgical actions, renews the history of human infidelity to the divine plan, which was nonetheless brought about exactly in this way; and it listens once again to the moving narrative of the Lord's sorrowful Passion.

The Assembly then addresses to the Heavenly Father a long "prayer of the faithful" which embraces all the needs of the Church and of the world.

Subsequently, the community adores the Cross and receives the Eucharist, consuming the sacred species reserved from the Mass of the Lord's Supper on the previous day.

In commenting on Good Friday, St John Chrysostom observes: "First, the Cross stood for contempt, but today it is something venerable; before it was the symbol of condemnation, today it is the hope of salvation. It has truly become a source of infinite good; it has freed us from error, it has dispelled our shadows, it has reconciled us with God, it has transformed us from being enemies of God to being members of his family, from being strangers to being his neighbours: this Cross is the destruction of enmity, the source of peace, the casket of our treasure" (*cf. De Cruce et Latrone* I, 1, 4).

To relive the Redeemer's Passion more intensely, the Christian tradition has developed many manifestations of popular piety, including the well-known Good Friday processions with the evocative rites, repeated each year.

However, there is one pious practice, the "Way of the Cross", which offers us throughout the year the possibility of impressing the mystery of the Cross ever more deeply on our minds, of accompanying Christ along this path and thus being inwardly conformed to him. We could say that the Way of the Cross teaches us, in the words of St Leo the Great, to "look at the Crucified Jesus with the eyes of the heart, to recognize in his flesh our own" (Talk 15, on the Lord's Passion). Precisely in this lies the true Christian wisdom which we want to learn by taking the Way of the Cross on Good Friday at the Colosseum.

Holy Saturday is the day when the liturgy is hushed, the day of great silence, and Christians are invited to preserve interior recollection, often difficult to encourage in our day, in order to be better prepared for the *Easter Vigil*.

Spiritual retreats and Marian prayer meetings are organized in many communities in order to be united with the Mother of the Redeemer, who waited, anxious but trusting, for the Resurrection of her Crucified Son.

Finally, during the Easter Vigil the veil of sorrow which shrouds the Church because of the death and burial of the Lord will be torn by the victorious cry: Christ is risen and has defeated death for ever! We will then truly be able to understand the mystery of the Cross, "since God also creates wonders even in the impossible", an ancient writer says, "so that we may know that he alone can do what he wills. From his death comes our life, from his wounds our healing, from his fall our resurrection, from his descent our uplifting" (Anonymous, *Quartodecimano*).

Enlivened by a stronger faith, we welcome in the heart of the Easter Vigil the newly baptized and renew the promises of our Baptism. Thus, we will feel that the Church is ever alive, ever rejuvenated, ever beautiful and holy, for she is founded on Christ, who having risen, will never die again.

Dear brothers and sisters, the Paschal Mystery which the Holy Triduum enables us to relive is not only the memory of a past reality; it is also a reality in our time. Christ also conquers sin and death today with his love. Evil in all its forms does not have the last word. The final triumph, the triumph of truth and love, is Christ's!

If we are willing to suffer and die with him, St Paul will remind us in the Easter Vigil, his life will become our life (cf. *Rom* 6: 9). Our Christian life is supported by and built upon this certainty. As I invoke the intercession of Mary Most Holy, who followed Jesus on the Way of the Passion and Cross and embraced him after his deposition, I express the hope that you will all take part devoutly in the Easter Triduum, to taste the joy of Easter with all your loved ones.

I am pleased to welcome the many university students gathered in Rome for "UNIV" 2007. May these days of reflection, friendship and prayer inspire in you a deeper love for Our Lord and his Church! To all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Ireland, Australia, Canada and the United States, I offer my prayerful good wishes for a happy and spiritually enriching celebration of Easter. Good Easter to all of you!

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