



The Holy See

CELEBRATION OF PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

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St Peter's Square

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[Multimedia]

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord” (Lk 19:38). So the crowd greeted Jesus as he entered Jerusalem. The Messiah entered through the gate of the holy city, thrown open to welcome the one who, a few days later, would leave through the same gate, this time cursed and condemned, bearing the cross.

Today we too have followed Jesus, first in a festive procession and then along a path of pain and sorrow, as we enter upon this Holy Week of preparation for the commemoration of the Lord’s passion, death and resurrection.

As we look at the faces of the soldiers and the tears of the women in the crowd, our attention is drawn to an unknown person whose name suddenly appears in the Gospel: Simon of Cyrene. He was the man seized by the soldiers who then “laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus” (Lk 23:26). At that moment, he was coming in from the countryside. He happened to be passing by when he unexpectedly found himself caught up in a drama that overwhelmed him, like the heavy wood that was placed on his shoulders.

As we make our own way towards Calvary, let us reflect for a moment on Simon’s *actions*, try to look into his *heart*, and follow in his *footsteps* at the side of Jesus.

First of all, Simon’s *actions* were ambivalent. On the one hand, he was forced to carry the cross.

He did not help Jesus out of conviction, but out of coercion. On the other hand, he then becomes personally involved in the Lord's passion. Jesus' cross becomes Simon's cross. He was not the Simon, called Peter, who had promised to follow the Master at all times. That Simon disappeared on the night of betrayal, even after he had exclaimed: "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death" (*Lk 22:33*). The one who now follows Jesus is not that disciple, but this man from Cyrene. Yet the Master had clearly taught: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (*Lk 9:23*). Simon of Galilee spoke but did not act. Simon of Cyrene acts but does not speak. Between him and Jesus, there is no dialogue; not a single word is spoken. Between him and Jesus, there is only the wood of the cross.

If we would know whether Simon of Cyrene helped or hated Jesus, in whose suffering he now had to share, whether he "took up" the Lord's cross or simply carried it, we must look into his *heart*. While God's heart is ever open, pierced by a pain that reveals his mercy, the human heart remains closed. We do not know what went on in Simon's heart. Let us imagine ourselves in his place: would we feel anger or pity, compassion or annoyance? When we think of what Simon did for Jesus, we should also think of what Jesus did for Simon — what he did for me, for you, for each of us: he redeemed the world. The cross of wood that Simon of Cyrene bore is the cross of Christ, who himself bore the sins of all humanity. He bore them for love of us, in obedience to the Father (cf. *Lk 22:42*); he suffered with us and for us. In this unexpected and astonishing way, Simon of Cyrene becomes part of the history of salvation, in which no one is a stranger, no one a foreigner.

Let us follow, then, in Simon's *footsteps*, for he teaches us that Jesus comes to meet everyone, in every situation. When we see the great crowds of men and women whom hatred and violence are compelling to walk the road to Calvary, let us remember that God has made this road a place of redemption, for he walked it himself, giving his life for us. How many Simons of Cyrene are there in our own day, bearing the cross of Christ on their shoulders! Can we recognize them? Can we see the Lord in their faces, marred by the burden of war and deprivation? Faced with the appalling injustice of evil, we never carry the cross of Christ in vain; on the contrary, it is the most tangible way for us to share in his redemptive love.

Jesus' passion becomes compassion whenever we hold out our hand to those who feel they cannot go on, when we lift up those who have fallen, when we embrace those who are discouraged. Brothers and sisters, in order to experience this great miracle of mercy, let us decide how we are meant to carry our own cross during this Holy Week: if not on our shoulders, in our hearts. And not only our cross, but also the cross of those who suffer all around us; perhaps even the cross of some unknown person whom chance — but is it really chance? — has placed on our way. Let us prepare for the Lord's paschal mystery by becoming each of us, for one another, a Simon of Cyrene.
