

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE BENEDICT XVI

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As the Lenten journey -- begun with Ash Wednesday -- comes to an end, today's liturgy of Holy Wednesday already introduces us into the dramatic atmosphere of the coming days, filled with the remembrance of the passion and death of Christ. In fact, in today's liturgy, the Evangelist Matthew presents for our meditation the brief dialogue that occurred in the Upper Room between Jesus and Judas. "Surely it is not I, Rabbi?" the traitor says to the Divine Teacher, who had prophesied: "Amen, I say to you, one of you will betray me."

**The Lord's answer was incisive: "You have said so" (cf. Matthew 26:14-25).
St. John concludes narrating the prophecy of the betrayal with a short, meaningful phrase:
"It was night" (John 13:30).**

When the traitor exits the Upper Room, darkness penetrates his heart -- it is an internal night -- discouragement grows in the spirits of the other disciples -- they too go toward the night -- while the shadows of abandonment and hate grow darker around the Son of Man, who prepares himself for the consummation of his sacrifice on the cross. In the coming days, we will commemorate the supreme battle between Light and Darkness, between Life and Death. We also have to place ourselves within this context -- aware of our own "night," of our sins and responsibilities -- if we want to spiritually benefit again from the paschal mystery, if we want to bring light to our hearts, by way of this mystery, which is the center point of our faith.

The beginning of the Easter triduum is Holy Thursday.

During the Chrism Mass, which can be considered a prelude to the triduum, bishops of dioceses and their closest collaborators, the priests, surrounded by the people of God, renew the promises they made on the day of their priestly ordination.

Year after year, it is an intense moment of ecclesial communion, which highlights the gift of the ministerial priesthood which Christ left to his Church on the night before he died on the cross. And for each priest, it is a moving moment in the midst of the vigil of the passion, in which the Lord gave himself to us, gave us the sacrament of the Eucharist, and gave us the priesthood.

It is a day that moves our hearts. Later, the holy oils used for the sacraments are blessed: oil of catechumens, oil of the sick, and holy chrism. In the afternoon, entering into the Easter triduum, the community relives in the Mass "in Cena Domini" all that took place in the Last Supper. In the Upper Room, the Redeemer wanted to anticipate, with the sacrament of blood and wine made his body and his blood, the sacrifice of his life: He anticipated his death, the free gift of his life, offered as the definitive gift of himself to humanity.

With the washing of the feet,

the gesture is repeated with which he, having loved his own in this world, loved them to the end (cf. John 13:1), and left his disciples, as a sort of trademark, this act of humility, love unto death.

After the Mass "in Cena Domini," the liturgy invites the faithful to remain in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, reliving Jesus' agony in Gethsemane. And we see how the disciples slept, leaving the Lord alone.

Today as well -- frequently -- we sleep -- we, his disciples. In this holy night of Gethsemane, we want to stay on guard; we do not want to leave the Lord alone in this hour. And in doing this, we can better understand the mystery of Holy Thursday, which encompasses the threefold, most-high gifts of the ministerial priesthood, the Eucharist and the new commandment of love, "agape."

Good Friday,

which commemorates the happenings between Christ's condemnation to death and his crucifixion, is a day of penance, of fasting, of prayer, of participation in the passion of the Lord. At the prescribed hour, the Christian assembly retraces, with the help of the Word of God and liturgical actions, the history of human infidelity to the divine plan, which nevertheless is fulfilled precisely in this way. And we listen again to the moving narration of the sorrowful passion of the Lord. Later, a long "prayer of the faithful" is directed to the heavenly Father, which includes all of the needs of the Church and the world. Then, the community adores the cross, and approaches the Eucharist, consuming the sacred species, reserved since the Mass "in Cena Domini" from the day before.

Commenting on Good Friday, St. John Chrysostom said: "Before, the cross meant disdain, but today it is venerated. Before, it was a symbol of condemnation, today it is the hope of salvation. It has truly been converted into a fount of infinite goods; it has liberated us from error, it has scattered our darkness, it has reconciled us with God. From being enemies of God, it has made us his family, from foreigners it has converted us to his neighbors: This cross is the destruction of enmity, the fount of peace, the coffer of our treasure" ("De cruce et latrone," I, 1, 4).

To live the passion of the Redeemer more intensely, Christian tradition has given rise to numerous manifestations of popular piety, among them, the well-known Good Friday processions, with the evocative rites which are repeated year after year. But there is one expression of piety, the Way of the Cross, that offers us year-round the opportunity to impress in our spirits ever more deeply the mystery of the cross, advancing with Christ along this path and thus, interiorly conforming ourselves to him.

We could say that the Way of the Cross teaches us, using an expression from St. Leo the Great, to "fix the eyes of our heart on Christ crucified and recognize in him our own humanity" (Sermon 15 on the Passion of the Lord). In this consists the true wisdom of Christianity, that we wish to learn with the Way of the Cross on Good Friday in the Colosseum.

Holy Saturday

is a day in which the liturgy is hushed, the day of great silence, which invites Christians to foster an interior recollection, often difficult to maintain in our day, so as to prepare us for the Easter Vigil. In many communities, spiritual retreats and Marian prayer meetings are organized on this day, in union with the Mother of the Redeemer, who awaits the resurrection of the crucified Son with anxious confidence.

Finally, in the Easter Vigil,

the veil of sadness, which surrounds the Church during the death and burial of the Lord, will be torn in two by the victorious cry: Christ has risen and has overcome death forever! Then we can truly understand the mystery of the cross and, as an ancient author writes: "As God creates wonders even from the impossible, so that we will know that only he can do as he wishes: From his death proceeds our life; from his wounds, our healing; from his fall, our resurrection, from his descent, our rising up" (Anonymous 14th).

Animated by a stronger faith, at the heart of the Easter Vigil, we welcome the newly baptized and renew our own baptismal promises. Thus, we will experience that the Church is always alive, always renewing itself, always beautiful and holy, because its foundation is Christ, who, having risen, will never die again. Dear brothers and sisters, the paschal mystery, which the holy triduum allows us to relive, is not only a memory of a past reality. It is a current reality: Today, too, Christ overcomes sin and death with his love. Evil, in all of its forms, does not have the final word. The final triumph belongs to Christ, to truth, to love!

If we, with him, are willing to suffer and die, as St. Paul reminds us in the Easter Vigil, his life will become our life (cf. Romans 6:9). Our Christian existence is based on and grows from this certainty.

Invoking the intercession of Holy Mary, who followed Jesus on the path of the passion and the cross, and who embraced him when he was taken down from the cross, I hope that all of you will participate fervently in the Easter triduum, and will experience the joy of Easter with all of your loved ones. **BENEDICTUS PP. XVI**

Good Easter to all of you!