

*The*  
P O W E R  
*of the*  
C R O S S

*Good Friday Sermons  
from the Papal Preacher*

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WORD  
on FIRE.

## INTRODUCTION

There is one day during the year when the peak moment in the liturgy of the Church is not the Eucharist but the cross. In other words, the liturgy is not centered on the *sacrament* but on the *event*. We are talking about Good Friday. Mass is not celebrated on that day when we contemplate and adore the crucifix alone.

In the Easter Vigil, the Church commemorates simultaneously both the death and Resurrection of Christ as two inseparable moments of one Easter mystery. Soon, however, the need was felt to dedicate a special day to the Passion to highlight the importance and the infinite richness of that moment in which “all was accomplished.” Since the fourth century, there have been services for the adoration of the cross on Good Friday. These had a very positive influence on the faith and worship of Christians throughout the centuries. There is a special grace pulsing through the Church on that day. This is the day when, in the words of the ancient hymn, *fulget crucis mysterium*—“the mystery of the cross shines forth.”

The meditations contained in this book were prepared specifically for this time and atmosphere of commemoration and adoration, and were presented in St. Peter’s Basilica in the presence of the three last popes: St. John Paul II from 1980 to 2005, Benedict XVI from 2006 to 2012, and Pope Francis from 2013 to 2021. Together, the reflections form a prolonged contemplation on the crucifix and a special “Way of the Cross” based entirely on the Word of God, especially on the readings of the day: Isaiah 52:13–53:12; Hebrews 4:14–16; 5:7–9; Philippians 2:8–9; and John 18:1–19:42. Sometimes the tone is kerygmatic, like a mighty proclamation of the power of the cross; at other times, it is more moral and existential.

It is my hope that the book might serve the twofold purpose of meditating on the Passion of Christ and providing input for a New Evangelization in “Spirit and power” (1 Cor 2:4). For today, as in the early Church, the Gospel will not make headway in the world as a result of “the wisdom of discourses,”

but through the mysterious power of the cross. St. Paul said, “Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:22–24). This book is a simple echo of those words, which still retain all their programmatic significance.

I am delighted that the English texts of these meditations, revised and corrected by myself in view of this edition, will now be available in the United States and throughout the English-speaking world. I am also grateful that they are being published by Word on Fire with which I share the same passion for an evangelization firmly rooted in Catholic tradition and spirituality, while at the same time being open to the treasures of other Christian churches and to modern culture.

I want to express my deep gratitude to the various individuals who, over the years, have taken on the burden of translating into English the original Italian text: Frances Lonergan Villa; Charles Serignat, OFM Cap.; Zenit Agency; Marsha Daigle-Williamson; and to Patrick McSherry, OFM Cap., who provided the final revision.

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## LET EVERY TONGUE PROCLAIM THAT JESUS CHRIST IS LORD

*Good Friday 1980*

On the day of Yom Kippur, the day of the Great Atonement—the holiest day of the year for Jews—the high priest passed through the temple veil and entered into the Holy of Holies carrying the blood of the victims. There, alone in the presence of the Most High, he pronounced the divine name—the name revealed to Moses as he stood before the burning bush. It consisted of four letters. Except on this one occasion, no one was permitted to speak that name, and in its stead used the word *Adonai*, which means Lord. Out of respect for the tradition of the Jewish people for whom the Church prays on Good Friday, I, too, shall refrain from pronouncing it. When it was pronounced in the Holy of Holies, it became a link between heaven and earth; it made God present, and it atoned, even if only in figure, for the nation's sins.

We Christians also have our Yom Kippur, our day of Great Atonement, and that is what we are celebrating. The fulfillment was proclaimed in the second reading taken from the Letter to the Hebrews: “We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God” (Heb 4:14). The same letter tells us that “he entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood” (Heb 9:12). Today, as we celebrate the Great Atonement, no longer in figure but in reality, no longer for the sins of one nation but for “the sins of the whole world” (see 1 Jn 2:2; Rom 3:23–25), a name is proclaimed. In the acclamation before the Gospel, these words taken from St. Paul were sung: “He humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.”

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The Apostle also refrains from pronouncing this ineffable name, substituting it with *Adonai*—*Kyrios* in Greek, *Dominus* in Latin, and *Lord* in English. The reading then continues: “Every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:8–11). By the word “Lord,” he means precisely the name that proclaims the divine being. The Father gave Christ—also as a man—his own name and authority (see Mt 28:18). This is the unprecedented truth contained in the proclamation “Jesus Christ is Lord!” Jesus Christ is the “I am,” the living one.

It is not only St. Paul who proclaims this truth. In John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “For if you do not believe that I AM, you will die in your sins” (Jn 8:24). We have just heard in the reading of the Passion what happened when the soldiers went to take Jesus. “For whom are you looking?” asked Jesus. They answered, “Jesus, the Nazorean.” “When he said to them, ‘I AM,’ they turned away and fell to the ground” (Jn 18:4–6). Why did they fall to the ground? Because he had pronounced his divine name, *Ego eimi*, “I AM,” and for an instant this name was free to reveal its authority.

For John the Evangelist, too, the divine name is closely linked to the obedience of Jesus unto death. “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM, and that I do nothing on my own, but I say only what the Father taught me” (Jn 8:28). Jesus is not Lord against the Father or in the Father’s place, but to “the glory of God the Father.”

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This is the faith the Church inherited from the Apostles and that sanctified her beginnings and formed her worship and even her art. In ancient mosaics and icons, on the halo of Christ the *Pantocrator*, there are three Greek letters inscribed in gold, ὁ ὢν (*ho ōn*), “He who is.” We are here to revive this faith, even out of stones, if necessary. During the first centuries of the Church, during the week after their Baptism, usually Easter week, the most sacred truths of the Christian faith were revealed and entrusted to the

neophytes. Before this, following the so-called “discipline of the secret” (*Disciplina arcani*), they were kept hidden from them or only alluded to. With each new day, the “mysteries” were gradually unfolded to the neophytes: Baptism, the Eucharist, the Our Father, and their symbolism, which led to it being called the “mystagogical” catechesis. It was a unique experience which left a lasting impression on them for the greatness of the spiritual truths opening before their eyes. Tertullian said that the converts “were startled by the revelation of the truth” (*Apologeticum*, 39, 9).

Today, all this has changed, but the liturgy still offers us occasions for re-creating such moments, and the solemn liturgy of Good Friday is one of them. This evening, if we concentrate on it, the Church has something to reveal and to hand down to us as it did to the neophytes. It has the Lordship of Christ to hand down to us. It reveals to us the hidden secret that “Jesus is Lord,” that every knee must bow before him, and that one day every knee will unfailingly bow before him! In the Hebrew Scriptures, it is said that “the Lord has sent a word against Jacob, and it falls upon Israel” (Is 9:8). The words “Jesus is Lord,” the greatest of all words, are now “sent against us” and “fall” upon this congregation; they become a living reality for us right here in the very heart of the Catholic Church. They pass among us like the flaming torch between the victims prepared by Abraham for the sacrifice of the covenant (see Gn 15:17).

Lord is the divine name that concerns us most directly. God was *God* and *Father* before the existence of the world, angels, and humans, but he was not yet *Lord*. He became Lord, *Dominus*, the moment creatures existed over whom he could exercise his *dominion* and who freely accepted his dominion. In the Trinity, there are no lords because there are no servants, and all three persons are equal. In a certain sense, it is us who make God *Lord*! God’s dominion, rejected by sin, was reestablished by Christ, the New Adam. In Christ, God has become Lord again by an even greater right—that is, not only by reason of creation, but also by that of redemption. God reigns again from the cross! “For this is why Christ died and came to life, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living” (Rom 14:9).

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The *objective dimension* of the phrase “Jesus is Lord” lies in the fact that it makes history present. It is the conclusion of two fundamental events: Jesus died for our sins and he is risen for our justification; therefore, Jesus is Lord! The events that led up to it are, so to say, contained in the conclusion and become present and operative in it when we confess in faith: “For if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9).

We can participate in the events of salvation in two fundamental ways: through the sacraments and through the Word. Here we mean the Word in its most sublime form, the kerygma. Christianity is rich in examples and models of experiences of the divine. Orthodox spirituality stresses the experience of God through the “mysteries” and through prayer of the heart. Western spirituality stresses the experience of God through contemplation, when the soul recollects itself and the mind rises beyond itself and things. There are, in fact, many “journeys of the soul to God.” God’s Word reveals a way that opened the horizon of God to the first Christians, a way that is neither extraordinary nor reserved to a privileged few, but is possible to all people of upright heart, to those who believe and to those in search of faith. It does not ascend through the stages of contemplation but through the divine events of salvation. It does not come from silence but from listening, and this is the way of the kerygma: “Christ has died! Christ is risen! He is Lord.”

Perhaps the first Christians experienced something similar when they exclaimed “Maranatha” during worship. This phrase had two meanings depending on the way it was pronounced. It could mean either, “Come, Lord!” or “The Lord has come.” It could express a yearning for Christ’s return or a joyous response to his manifestation to the congregation in prayer.

The awareness of the risen Lord’s presence is like an inner illumination that can provoke a complete change of heart. It recalls what happened when the risen Christ appeared to his disciples. One day after Easter, the Apostles were fishing in Lake Tiberias when a man stood on the beach and spoke to

them. Everything was quite normal. They were complaining that they had caught nothing, but then, unexpectedly, the disciple whom Jesus loved exclaimed in a flash of recognition, "It is the Lord" (Jn 21:7), and immediately the situation on the boat changed.

We can see now why St. Paul claims that "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3). As the bread on the altar becomes the living Body of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon it, likewise these words become "living and active" (Heb 4:12) by the power of the Holy Spirit operating in them. It is an event of grace that we can desire and predispose ourselves to receive but that we ourselves cannot cause. It is usually in retrospect, maybe even years afterward, that we become aware of what happened. At this moment, what took place in the heart of the beloved disciple on Lake Tiberias could be taking place in the heart of someone present here; someone could be "acknowledging" the Lord.

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There is also a *subjective dimension* to the words "Jesus is Lord!" that depends on the person who is saying them. I have often wondered why the demons in the Gospels never once gave Jesus this title. They go as far as saying, "You are the Son of God," and "You are the Holy One of God!" (see Mt 4:3; Mk 3:11, 5:7; Lk 4:41), but never do they say, "You are the Lord!" The most plausible reason for this seems to be that saying "You are the Son of God" is simply to acknowledge a given fact that does not depend on them and that they cannot change. They know that Jesus is God's Son. (Some theologians today don't know it, but the demons do.) But to say "You are the Lord!" is a different matter. It means recognizing him as such and submitting to his lordship. If the demons were to do so, they would immediately cease being what they are and would become angels of light again.

These words divide two worlds. To say, "Jesus is Lord!" means to enter freely into his dominion. It is like saying, "Jesus Christ is *my* Lord, the very reason of my existence. I live for him and no longer for myself." St. Paul



wrote to the Romans, “None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself. For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom 14:7–8). Life and death—the greatest contradiction ever present in humans—has been overcome. Now the radical contradiction is no longer between living and dying, but between living “for the Lord” and living “for oneself.” Living for oneself is the new name for death.

With Easter, the proclamation that Jesus is Lord supersedes the proclamation of the historical Jesus: “The kingdom of God has come near to you” (Lk 10:9). Before the Gospels were written and even before they were planned, the news existed that “Jesus is risen. He is the Messiah. He is the Lord!” It all started there. Like a seed, that news contained all the authority of evangelical teaching, and from that seed came the majestic tree of all the teaching and theology of the Church. However, as happens with natural seed, it has remained buried beneath the plant it produced. To our minds today, the kerygma is a truth of the faith, one point, however important, of teaching and preaching. It no longer stands out as the very origin of the faith.

My first reaction to a Scripture text is always to seek the resonances it has in Tradition—that is, in the Fathers of the Church, the liturgy, and the saints. Usually, my mind teems with testimonies. But in similar efforts with the words “Jesus is Lord,” I was forced to admit that there is almost no mention of it in Tradition. In the third century AD, people had lost sight of the original meaning of Lord. It was considered a proper title for those who were still “servants” and not yet “friends.” As a result, it corresponded to a state of fear rather than love (see Origen, *Comm. on John*, I, 29), whereas we know it is a different thing altogether.

For a new worldwide evangelization, we must again bring to light that seed that holds the whole Christian message. It is necessary to unearth “the sword of the Spirit” (Eph 6:17), the impassioned message of the Lordship of Christ. A well-known epic cycle of medieval Christendom, the *Knights of the Round Table*, tells of a world where everything languishes in confusion when no one any longer asks the essential question: “Where is the Holy Grail?”

However, everything reflowerishes once these sacred words are pronounced again and dominate anew every thought. I am convinced that something similar is happening in regard to the kerygma, Jesus is Lord! Everything languishes and lacks vigor where these words are no longer proclaimed or are no longer proclaimed “in the Spirit,” but when they are pronounced in all their purity and faith, everything is reanimated and revives. Apparently, nothing is more familiar to us than the word “Lord.” It is part of the very name that concludes every liturgical prayer. However, it is one thing to say, “our Lord Jesus Christ,” and another to say, “Jesus Christ is our Lord!” For centuries the proclamation “Jesus is Lord” in Philippians 2:11 has been blurred by a bad translation. In fact, the meaning of this famous passage is not, as the Latin Vulgate has it, “The Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father,” but “Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

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Still, it is not sufficient to proclaim with the tongue that Jesus Christ is Lord. It is also necessary that “every knee should bend.” These are not two separate things. Whoever proclaims Jesus as Lord must bend their knee in doing so. They must, as it were, lovingly submit themselves to the reality, bending their intelligence in obedience to faith. It is a question of renouncing that feeling of power and security that comes from wisdom—that is, from the ability to face this incredulous and proud world of ours with its own weapons of dialectics, endless arguments and discussions, all of which leave us to “endlessly seek learning, but never reach knowledge” (see 2 Tm 3:7) and therefore never being compelled to obey the truth once it has been discovered.

The kerygma offers no explanations but exacts obedience, because in it, God’s own authority is at work. *After* it and *beside* it, we can give all the reasons and demonstrations we like, but not *within* it. The light of the sun is in the sun, and as it illuminates everything, it cannot itself be illuminated. One has to be blind not to see it. We must accept the weaknesses and foolishness of the

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kerygma—and this means we accept our own weaknesses, humiliations, and defeats—to allow God’s power and wisdom to triumph again. St. Paul says, “For the weapons of our battle are not of flesh but are enormously powerful, capable of destroying fortresses. We destroy arguments and every pretension raising itself against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive in obedience to Christ” (2 Cor 10:4–5). In other words, we must stay on the cross, as that is where the power of the Lordship of Christ comes to us.

We must be careful not to be ashamed of the kerygma, for such a temptation does exist! Even the Apostle felt it and to himself cried out, “I am not ashamed of the Gospel” (Rom 1:16). The temptation is even stronger today. We wonder what sense there is in talking about the risen Christ who is Lord when we see all around us numerous real problems that assail humanity: hunger, injustice, war, etc. People delight in hearing talk about themselves, for good or ill, much more than hearing talk about God. In Paul’s time, part of the world looked for miracles and another part looked for wisdom. Today, one part looks for justice (those living under capitalist regimes) and another part looks for freedom (those living under communist regimes). We, however, proclaim Jesus Christ crucified and risen (see 1 Cor 1:23), for we are convinced that the foundation of true justice and freedom is to be found in him.

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In mystagogical catechesis, the mysteries were revealed by word and by rite. The neophytes heard the mysteries explained and attended the rites, especially the Eucharistic rite, which they had never previously seen with their own eyes. Something similar is taking place in this service where the mystery of the Lordship of Christ is being entrusted to us. After the Liturgy of the Word, the rite will follow. The crucifix will be unveiled with solemnity, and we shall all genuflect three times, thus visibly demonstrating that in the Church every knee does bow. The purple veil that has been covering the crucifix up to now symbolizes the veil that covers the bare crucifix from the

eyes of the world. “To this very day whenever Moses is read,” wrote St. Paul, speaking of his compatriots, “a veil lies over their hearts, but whenever a person turns to the Lord the veil is removed” (2 Cor 3:15–16). Unfortunately, the eyes of many Christians are also covered by that veil, and it will only be removed when they “turn to the Lord,” when they discover the Lordship of Christ. Only then.

This evening, when the bare crucifix is lifted up before our eyes, let us gaze upon it. This is the Jesus we proclaim as Lord, not a different one, an easy, sappy Jesus. What we are about to do is very important. To allow us the privilege of calling him King and Lord, as we now shall do, Jesus accepted to be called “king” in mockery. To allow us the privilege of humbly bowing our knee before him, he allowed others to kneel before him in derision. It is written: “They [the soldiers] clothed him in purple and, weaving a crown of thorns, placed it on him. They began to salute him with, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ and kept striking his head with a reed and spitting upon him. They knelt before him in homage” (Mk 15:17–19). We must comprehend well what we are doing so as to act in profound adoration and gratitude, for the price he paid is too high for anything less. While alive, he heard only proclamations of hatred. The genuflections made before him were ones of ignominy. Let us not add to this with our indifference and superficiality.

When he was dying on the cross, he could still hear the deafening echoes of the shouting, and the word “king” hung over his head like a sentence. Now that he is at the right hand of the Father and is present among us in the Spirit, let him see that every knee does in fact bow before him, and with it the mind, the heart, the will, and everything. Let him hear this cry of joy bursting from the hearts of the redeemed: “Jesus Christ is the Lord, to the glory of God the Father!”