

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



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*of the*  
C R O S S

*Good Friday Sermons  
from the Papal Preacher*

CARDINAL RANIERO  
CANTALAMESSA

WORD  
on FIRE.

Published by Word on Fire, Elk Grove Village, IL 60007  
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Cover design, typesetting, and interior art direction  
by Rozann Lee and Cassie Bielak

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26 25 24 23 1 2 3 4

ISBN: 978-1-68578-003-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021922706

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## 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 2022. 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.

Extracts from my sermons were published in 2013 by “The Word Among Us” under the title *The Fire of Christ’s Love*. They are reproduced here in their original context, with the kind permission of the publisher.

# 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.”

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.”

\* \* \*

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).

\* \* \*

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.

\* \* \*

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.”

\* \* \*

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

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.

\* \* \*

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!”

## GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

*Good Friday 1981*

The accounts of the Passion, especially in the synoptic Gospels, so sparse in style and thoroughly lacking in any theological or edifying detail, take us back to the early days of the Church. From a modern form-criticism perspective, these were the first sections of the Gospels to be formed or drawn from an oral tradition that had already circulated among Christians. In this earliest phase of transmission, facts are the predominant factor. Everything can be summarized in two events: death and Resurrection. This stage, however, quickly moved on. Believers soon queried about the “why” of the Passion. Why did Jesus suffer? And the answer was, “For our sins!” Thus the beginnings of the Easter faith expressed by St. Paul in his well-known formula: “[Christ] was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (see Rom 4:25). We now had both the facts—death and Resurrection—and their significance for us: for our sins, for our justification. The answer seemed complete: history and faith come together to form a single Easter mystery.

However, the root of the question had not been touched. “For our sins” and “for our justification” explained the *purpose*, not the *cause* of Jesus’ death and Resurrection. The query arose again in yet another form: “*Why* did he die for our sins?” Like a flash of sunlight illuminating the faith of the Church, the answer came: “Because he loved us!” “Christ loved us and handed himself over for us” (Eph 5:2). He “has loved me and given himself up for me” (Gal 2:20). “Christ loved the Church and handed himself over for her” (Eph 5:25). This indisputable, primordial truth pervades everything and applies both to the Church in its entirety and to each individual human being. St. John the

Evangelist, the last to write his Gospel, dates this revelation back to Christ when he was on earth: “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends” (Jn 15:13–14).

This answer to the “why” of Christ’s Passion is really final and allows for no further questions. He loved us because he loved us, and that’s all there is to it! In fact, there is no “why” to God’s love; it is a free gift. It is the only love in the world that is truly and totally free, that asks nothing for itself (he already has everything!) but only gives; or better yet, he gives himself. “In this is love: not that we have loved God but that he loved us. . . . We love because he first loved us” (1 Jn 4:10, 19).

Jesus suffered and died freely, out of love—not by chance, not out of necessity, not because of some hidden catalyst or misunderstanding that took him unawares or against his will. To assert such would be to nullify the Gospel, to remove its soul, because the Gospel is nothing other than the good news of God’s love in Christ Jesus. Not only the Gospel but the entire Bible is nothing other than the news of God’s mysterious, incomprehensible love for people. If the whole of Scripture were to start talking at once, if by some miracle the written words were transformed into speech, that voice would be more powerful than the waves of the sea, and it would cry out: “God loves you!”

\* \* \*

God’s love for people is rooted in eternity (“He chose us in him, before the foundation of the world,” says the Apostle in Ephesians 1:4), but it was manifested in time, in a series of actual gestures that makes up the history of salvation. In ancient times, God had already spoken to our ancestors frequently and in many and varied ways about this love of his (see Heb 1:1). It was spoken when God created us, because what is creation if not an act of love, indeed the primordial act of God’s love for humanity? Later, it was spoken through the prophets, because in reality the biblical prophets are nothing other than messengers of God’s love, “friends of the Bridegroom”

(see Jn 3:29). Even their rebukes and threats are intended as a defense of that love of God for his people. In the prophets, God compares his love to that of a mother (see Is 49:15ff), to that of a father (see Hos 11:4), and to that of a bridegroom (see Is 62:5). In a phrase unheard of in any philosophy or religion, placed on the lips of a god, God himself sums up his entire relationship and comportment toward Israel by saying: “With age-old love I have loved you!” (Jer 31:3). The god of the philosophers is a god to be loved but not a God who loves—and who loves first.

Still, it was not enough for God to speak about his love “through the prophets”; “in these last days, he spoke to us through a son” (Heb 1:2). Compared to what came before, an enormous qualitative difference has taken place. Unlike the prophets before him, Jesus is not confined to speaking *about* God’s love—he *is* the love of God, because “God is love” and Jesus is God!

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In Jesus, God no longer speaks to us from a distance, through intermediaries, but from close up and in person. He speaks to us from within our human condition, after having savored to the fullest the suffering it entails. God’s love has taken flesh and has come to live among us! Jesus loves us with a heart that is both human and divine—with a perfectly human love, the measure of which is divine. He loves us with a love that is strong and tender, gentle and constant. How much he loves the disciples! How much he loves the children! How much he loves the poor and the sick! How much he loves sinners! It is his love of people that makes them grow, that restores their dignity and hope. All who draw near to Jesus with a simple heart emerge transformed by his love.

His love develops into friendship: “I no longer call you slaves. . . . I have called you friends” (Jn 15:15). And it does not stop there! He even goes to the extent of identifying so intimately with humanity that all other human analogies, even that of a mother, a father, or a spouse, pale in comparison: “We remain in him and he in us!” (1 Jn 4:13).

Finally, we have the utmost proof of his love: “He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end” (Jn 13:1)—that is, to love’s ultimate extreme. Two things reveal the true lover and make love triumph: the first consists in doing good to the beloved, and the second (by far superior) in suffering for him or her. This is why, in order to demonstrate his great love for us, God finds a way to bring about his own “annihilation” by enduring terrible sufferings. In this way, through all that he endures, God convinces people of his extraordinary love for them and once again draws to himself the very people who had fled from the good Lord, thinking that they were the objects of his hatred (see Nicholas Cabasilas, *Life in Christ*, VI, 2). Jesus repeats to us what he once said to St. Angela of Foligno while she was meditating on the Passion: “My love for you was not a joke!” (*Instruction*, XXIII).

If we want to know the depth of God’s love for us, there is a simple and certain way of knowing: by looking at how much he suffered—not just in his body but most of all in his soul. The true Passion of Jesus is the one that cannot be seen, the one at Gethsemane that made him cry out: “My soul is sorrowful even to death” (Mk 14:34). Jesus died in his heart before he died physically. Who can fathom the depths of desolation, sadness, and anguish in Christ’s soul as he—the innocent Son of the Father—felt himself “made sin” (see 2 Cor 5:21). The Good Friday liturgy has rightly placed on Christ’s lips the words of the Lamentation: “Come, all who pass by the way, pay attention and see: Is there any pain like my pain?” (Lam 1:12).

It was with this moment in mind that the phrase *Sic Deus dilexit mundum*—“God so loved the world” (Jn 3:16)—was written. At the beginning of his Gospel, John exclaims: “We saw his glory” (Jn 1:14)! If we were to ask the evangelist, “Where did you see his glory?” he would reply, “I saw his glory at the foot of the cross.” God’s glory lies in the fact that he hid his glory for our sake, for love of us. This is the greatest glory God has outside of himself, outside of the Trinity, greater even than having created us or the entire universe. Seated now at the Father’s right hand in glory, Christ’s body no longer retains the signs and characteristics of his mortal condition, but the book of Revelation tells us that there is one thing he does jealously retain and

show to the whole court of heaven: his wounds, the signs of his Passion (see Rv 5:6). He is proud of these because they are the telltale signs of the depth of his love for his creatures. Raised high upon the cross, Jesus has reason to repeat to us today the words we hear in the liturgy: “My people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you? Answer me!” (Mi 6:3).

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Someone might say: “Yes, it’s true that Jesus, when he was on earth, once loved us, but what about now? Now that he is no longer among us, is all that is left of that love just a faint memory?” Like the disciples of Emmaus who said, “Three days have gone by already” (see Lk 24:21), we might be tempted to think: “Two thousand years have gone by already!” Just as those disciples were wrong because Jesus was risen and walking by their side, so are we wrong when we begin to think like them. In fact, his love is still among us “because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom 5:5).

This, then, is the second great truth we celebrate today, no less beautiful and important than the first: God loved the world so much that he gave us his Holy Spirit! The water flowing from Christ’s side, mingled with his blood, was the symbol of the Holy Spirit. “This is how we know that we remain in him and he in us, that he has given us of his Spirit” (1 Jn 4:13). Let us cling to this phrase of John’s because it sums up everything. Jesus has left us the gift of his whole self, his entire love, because “he was brought to life in the Spirit” (1 Pt 3:18).

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What I have just described is the objective revelation of God’s love in history. Let us now turn to ourselves. What shall we do and say after listening to the depth of God’s love for us? There are several possible responses, and one of them is to return God’s love! This is the first and greatest commandment



of the law! In the words of an ancient Church hymn: “How can we not love one who has so loved us?” (*Sic nos amantem quis non redamaret?*). There is, however, something that comes before that.

Another possible answer is to love one another as God loved us! Doesn’t John the Evangelist tell us that “since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another” (1 Jn 4:11)? But even prior to this there is something else we must do. First of all, we must believe in God’s love! “We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us” (1 Jn 4:16). This kind of faith is not a simple intellectual assent to a truth. It is much more. It is amazing faith, *incredulous* faith—indeed a paradox! It is such that, even while believing, we cannot convince ourselves of what we believe. How could it possibly be that God, so infinitely happy in the quiet serenity of eternity, desired not only to create us but to personally come and suffer among us? How can this be true? Most of the New Testament quotations cited so far are exclamations. They express the early Church’s sense of awe: “He loved me and he gave himself for me!”; “God so loved the world!”

How marvelous this faith—a mix of awe and admiration—and yet more difficult than anything else could ever be. Do we really believe that God loves us? No, we don’t really believe it, or at least not strongly enough! If we were to believe it, everything—our lives, ourselves, things, and events—absolutely everything would be transfigured before our eyes. This very day we would be with him in paradise, for paradise is simply rejoicing in God’s love. An extracanonical saying attributed to Jesus puts it this way: “Whoever is amazed will reign” (*Gospel of the Hebrews*). Whoever, in the light of God’s unbelievable love for us, is seized with a profound sense of awe, whoever remains speechless before this love, will immediately enter the kingdom of heaven!

As I remarked before, however, we don’t really believe that God loves us. It is increasingly more difficult to believe in love in this world. There is too much unfaithfulness, too many disappointments. Anyone who has ever been betrayed or hurt is afraid to love again and to allow themselves to be loved because they know how much pain another betrayal would entail. So the number of those unable to believe in God’s love, or rather, in any love,

continues to increase. The world and life are falling back into an ice age. The earth remains, as Dante said, “that flowerbed which makes us so ferocious” (*Paradiso*, XXII, 151).

On a personal level, our own unworthiness also tempts us: “God’s love truly is a beautiful thing, but it’s not for me! How could God possibly love anyone as unfaithful and lax as me? I am not worthy . . .” Listen, however, to what God’s Word says to us: “If our hearts condemn, God is greater than our hearts and knows everything” (see 1 Jn 3:19–20).

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The world needs to believe in God’s love. We must begin again to proclaim the Gospel of God’s love in Jesus Christ. If we fail to do so we shall be like those who place “their candles under a bushel” (see Mk 4:21). We would be depriving the world of its deepest hunger, its innermost expectation. There are many others besides Christians who preach social justice and respect for others, but there is no one, among philosophers or other religions, no one, who tells us that God loves us and loved us first. Yet this truth is what sustains everything; it is the motivating power behind everything. Even the cause of the poor and oppressed is a lost cause if it isn’t based on the unshakable truth that God loves us and that he loves the poor and the oppressed.

Words and expressions of grief, however, are not enough. Like Jesus, we must be ready to suffer and to forgive those who cause suffering. “Father, forgive them” (Lk 23:34) were the words uttered by Jesus on the cross, and he bequeathed them to us Christians that we might keep them alive through the passing of centuries and mobilize ourselves with them. Jesus did not intend to relegate these words of forgiveness to those who were his enemies at that time and have since died; rather, these words extend that forgiveness to his enemies today, our enemies, the enemies of the Church. Christianity is the religion of forgiving enemies! Only when God’s love has helped a person to forgive an enemy at least once can that person claim to know the love of God that was poured into their heart by the Holy Spirit.

We should publicly thank those sisters and brothers in faith whose lives, after having been touched by hatred or having lost a loved one to violence, humbly followed the impulse of the Holy Spirit to forgive, even publicly, those who had murdered those who were dear to them. They believe in love! They are splendid witnesses of how Christ's love, manifested to us on the cross today, is still possible in the Spirit, and how only this love can change the world because it changes human hearts.

I have responded to the prophet Isaiah's cry, "Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her service has ended" (Is 40:1–2). I, too, have dared to speak "to the heart of Jerusalem"—that is, to the Church, to remind her of her most precious possession: the eternal love of her divine Spouse. Now the Spouse himself talks to the Church through the words of the Cantic:

Arise, my friend, my beautiful one,  
and come!

For see, the winter is past,  
the rains are over and gone.

The flowers appear on the earth. (Sg 2:10–12)

On this blessed day of Christ's death, a surge of joy uplifts the world.

## YOU HAVE KILLED JESUS OF NAZARETH!

*Good Friday 1982*

On the day of Pentecost, Peter stood up with the other eleven Apostles and spoke to the people. What he said can be summarized in a few words—words as powerful as a clash of thunder: “You crucified Jesus of Nazareth! God raised him up! Repent!” (see Acts 2:23ff).

I wish to make these words resound again among us today in the hope that they will pierce our hearts just as they pierced the hearts of those who were listening to the Apostle. The three thousand people to whom Peter addressed those words were certainly not all present on Calvary hammering the nails. Perhaps they were not even present in Pilate’s prætorium shouting *Crucifige!* How, then, did *they* kill Jesus? The answer lies in the fact that they had not heeded the news Jesus brought them: “The Kingdom of God has come; convert and believe in the Gospel!” (Mk 1:15). Perhaps, as Jesus was passing by on the streets of Jerusalem, they had lowered the blinds of their shops so as not to be disturbed.

In calling to mind those events, we ourselves feel “safe.” We think that we are not directly involved; it only concerns those who lived in Palestine at Jesus’ time. Perhaps we feel indignant like King David who, after hearing the prophet Nathan’s account of the great sin committed in the town, finally exploded in anger: “The man who has done this deserves death!” (2 Sm 12:5). Prompted by the Holocaust the Jews had recently experienced, in the years following World War II there was an impassioned interest in the question of who was responsible for Christ’s death. Numerous books were written and representations made focusing on Christ’s trial. The implications

of the answers given were enormous, especially since Christians were active participants in the various liberation movements taking place in diverse parts of the world. The inquiry into Christ's death became essentially historical, and as such, neutral. In other words, inasmuch as it has consequences for us today, it involves us indirectly but not directly, since we are not the ones to blame. We stand as the accusers, not the accused. Some blame Jesus' death on the religious powers of the time—namely, the Jews. Others place the blame on the political powers of the time—that is, on the Romans—thus making Jesus a martyr for the cause of freedom. Still others blame both. The bottom line, however, was that everyone more or less consciously repeated to themselves the declaration of Pilate: "I am innocent of this man's blood!" (Mt 27:24).

What did the prophet Nathan answer David that day? Pointing to him, he said, "*You* are that man!" (2 Sm 12:7). God cries out the same words to us as we try to discover who killed Jesus: "*You* are the one! *You* killed Jesus of Nazareth! *You* were there that day; *you* shouted with the crowd, 'Take him away, take him away! Crucify him!' (Jn 19:15). *You* were there with Peter when he denied him, and with Judas when he betrayed him. *You* were there with the soldiers when they scourged him; you added *your* thorn to his crown; *you* spat in his face!" The certainty that Christ died for our sins (Rom 4:25) is at the very heart of our faith. The prophet Isaiah anticipated this truth in a very dramatic way:

Yet it was our pain that he bore,  
our sufferings he endured. . . .  
He was pierced for our sins,  
crushed for our iniquity.  
He bore the punishment that makes us whole,  
by his wounds we were healed. (Is 53:4–5)

We all stand accused of his death for we have all sinned, and it would be a lie to deny this. Is not the proclamation that "Jesus died for our sins" the

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same as admitting that “we killed Jesus”? The Letter to the Hebrews, speaking about those who sin after Baptism (that is, us), says: “they are re-crucifying the Son of God for themselves and holding him up to contempt” (Heb 6:6).

On hearing the ghastly accusation, “*You* killed Jesus of Nazareth!” the three thousand were cut to the quick and said to Peter and the other Apostles, “What are we to do, my brothers?” (Acts 2:37). A great fear came upon them and, unless we’re made of stone, it should come upon us as well! How could we not be terrified at the thought that God so loved the world as to give his only Son and we, in response, killed him! We killed life.

The experience of this inner crisis—this “fear and trembling” (see Phil 2:12)—is necessary if we are to mature as Christians and not just remain Christians in embryo, on the way to light. Unless and until you have at least once experienced feeling lost, worthy of punishment, or shipwrecked, you cannot know what it means to be saved by Christ’s blood; you cannot really claim Jesus as your Savior. You cannot appreciate the depth of what Jesus suffered and be brought to tears over it. Only if I am deeply convinced that I am the cause of Christ’s suffering, that I inflicted it, can I really grasp what these sufferings were. Jesus says to *you* what he said to the holy women, “Do not weep for me; weep instead for yourselves” (Lk 23:28). Weep for *your* sins!

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As a response to this inner crisis, there are two possible solutions. The first is the path taken by Judas, who cried, “I have sinned in betraying innocent blood” and then went out and hanged himself (see Mt 27:4ff). The other is the path taken by Peter who went out and “wept bitterly” (Mt 26:75) and then, having experienced the power of repentance, showed others the way of salvation and resolutely cried out to the crowd, “Repent!”

What exactly does the word “repent” mean? How does one go about it? It happens when you move from the *imputation* of sin to the *confession* of sin—that is, from hearing someone else say to you, “You killed Jesus of Nazareth,” to owning it personally by saying in all sincerity and heartfelt

sorrow, “Yes, I killed Jesus of Nazareth!” This shift does not depend on us alone; it is the work of the Holy Spirit who “convinces the world of sin” (see Jn 16:8). It is something miraculous. When it happens, your heart undergoes spiritually the same phenomena that nature experienced on that day: the veil covering your mind is torn, your heart of stone is broken, the sepulcher where sin kept you imprisoned opens, and you are finally free. You are born again to life.

Confession of sin, when it is sincere and free, is a wonderful thing and makes us truly worthy as human beings! It allows God—the God who forgives sin (see Mi 7:18)—to be himself. By taking God’s side against ourselves, we induce God to do likewise—that is, to side with us against himself and against his own justice. Obviously, this is out of mercy and not out of need. The fact is that God *wants* to be merciful to us, but he can’t be if we deny our sin, the very object of God’s mercy. The most difficult thing for God to solicit is a “contrite and humble heart.” Omnipotence is not sufficient; God needs our free response, and that is why it is so precious and touches God’s heart.

Thus says the Lord:

The heavens are my throne,  
the earth, my footstool. . . .

This is the one whom I approve:  
the afflicted one, crushed in spirit. (Is 66:1–2)

Our greatest misfortune is that we do not acknowledge our sin from the depths of our hearts. We tell ourselves, “Look, what evil have I really done?” But, my friend, listen to me as I speak to my own sinful heart and also to yours. You can’t see your sin? Know this, then, that your sin is precisely that you can’t see it! Your sin is self-righteousness—the irremediable feeling that your conscience is clear in God’s sight and in your own, despite the fact that you may call yourself a sinner. It was this sin that brought Jesus to the cross after having strongly denounced it among the Pharisees.

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Feeling righteous, you can no longer understand Christ's cross nor your own. You feel that you and the entire world are victims of a disproportionate suffering, too great not to accuse God who permits it. If we could just once take to heart what Scripture says, "He [God] does not willingly afflict or bring grief to human beings" (Lam 3:33); before the misfortune of his people, his heart "recoils" within him and his compassion grows warm and tender (see Hos 11:8), then our reaction would be very different. We would exclaim instead, "Forgive us, Father, if we have forced you by our sins to treat your beloved Son so harshly! Forgive us if we now force you to afflict us too, in order to save us, even though you, like any parent, and infinitely more so, wish to give only 'good things' to your children (see Mt 7:11)! Forgive us if we force you to deprive yourself of the joy of giving us now, in this world, the happiness for which you created us."

I remember when I was a boy, I once went somewhere barefoot against my father's wishes. I cut my foot on a large shard of glass. This was during the war and my poor father had to take risks to get me to the nearest doctor of the allied forces. All the while the doctor was removing the glass and tending to the wound, my father, with his face turned away so as not to watch, stood there wringing his hands. What kind of son would I have been if, once back home, I had accused my father of letting me suffer without ever having done something to help? And yet, that's exactly what we often do with God.

The truth lies somewhere else. It is we who make God suffer and not the other way around. We have so contorted the truth that, after every calamity, we ask, "Where is God? How can God allow all of this?" Yes, God *could* save us without the cross, but this would be something quite different, and God knows that one day we would be ashamed of having been saved like this, passively, without having been allowed to collaborate in any way in our happiness.

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23), and therefore Peter's "Repent!" is addressed to us all. The book of Revelation contains seven letters to seven churches in Asia Minor (see Rv 1:4). Each one of these letters ends with a warning: "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Rv 2:7). A close reading shows



that the word *metanoia*, which means “repent, convert,” appears prominently at the center of each letter. Anyone who has an ear to hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church today knows that he is saying the same thing: “Repent!”

On October 9, 1963, the night before a landslide caused a mega-tsunami at the site of the Vajont Dam in Friuli, Italy, causing a terrible disaster, creaking sounds were heard coming from the site, but no one took any notice. Something similar is happening around us today, if we would only pay attention. This world we have built, wherein injustice mixes with open rebellion to God’s commandments, is creaking. The putrid smell of something burning fills the air. If John the Baptist were alive today, he would yell out to us, “Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance. . . . The ax lies at the root of the trees” (see Mt 3:8, 10).

Even nonbelievers are noticing this overshadowing threat hanging over us, but they react in a totally different way. They build atomic shelters! In these Cold War years, some nations are investing a large portion of their budgets in these, as if they were an answer to the problem! Believers are also in search of an atomic shelter, but ours—our Noah’s ark—is our repentance for our sins. For those whose hearts are fixed in God, their steady Rock, there is indeed no one and nothing that can frighten them. They join their voices to that of the Psalmist:

God is our refuge and our strength,  
an ever-present help in distress.  
Thus we do not fear, though earth be shaken  
and mountains quake to the depths of the sea. (Ps 46:2–3)

In the face of this unbridled world threatening me with destruction, I feel that I can say in faith what someone said to Othello in Shakespeare’s play: “Thou hast not half that power to do me harm as I have to be hurt,” because “I have the strength for everything through him who empowers me” (Phil 4:13). Jesus said, “Take courage, I have conquered the world” (Jn 16:33), and I believe him!

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We now come to another wonderful verse in Peter's sermon: "But God raised him up" (Acts 2:24). By resurrecting Jesus from the dead, God transformed our greatest sins into his greatest mercy. Since he had taken our sins on himself, by killing Jesus, we have killed our sins. Only if repentance reaches down into the very depths of our hearts can we savor now the flood of light and love encapsulated in this joyful Easter message. Whoever has been able to say in all sincerity, "I killed Jesus of Nazareth," knows what it means to be "born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (see 1 Pt 1:3). It is as if you were convinced that you had killed someone, and believing that there was no earthly escape possible, you fled in desperation only to unexpectedly discover that the "victim" had managed to survive, had forgiven you, and even wants to befriend you.

Sin holds no fear for us because we no longer bear it alone. Jesus "was raised for our justification" (Rom 4:25)—that is, so that he could take our sins on himself and, in exchange, grant us his justice. The repentant have descended to hell with Jesus, have been "baptized into his death" (see Rom 6:3), and now it is as if Jesus were dragging them together with himself out of the tomb and into a new life. "God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ" (Eph 2:4–5).

Perhaps you think this joyful message is not for you because your veil hasn't been torn and your eyes haven't overflowed with tears of repentance. Don't be sad and don't despair! This is God's gift. He can give it to you at any given moment or gradually, perhaps when you least expect it. Just persevere untiringly in desiring it and imploring him, just as I do. If you ardently long for repentance, you have already repented! Let yourself be born again to "a living hope" and begin to live your new life.

Look at all the people around you and say to yourself, "These are my sisters and brothers; all of them are my sisters and brothers!" When you leave here, look with new eyes at the people you meet—the members of your

family, your community, those at work—and say to yourself, “These are my sisters and brothers!” “They were all born there” (see Ps 87:5)—that is, in the heart of Jesus pierced for our sins!

Now it is the risen Christ himself who is speaking to us. Full of faith and enthusiasm, these words formed part of a liturgical service like this one, and were spoken by a bishop of one of the seven churches of Asia Minor, in the early years of the Church:

I destroyed death, and triumphed over the enemy,  
I carried man to the high heavens:  
Come, then, come all mankind  
immersed in sin.  
Receive the remission of your sin:  
For I am your resurrection and the Passover of your salvation,  
I am the lamb immolated for you,  
I am your ransom,  
your life,  
your resurrection,  
your light,  
your salvation,  
your king.  
I will show you the Father.  
(Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha*, 102–103)