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THE DEATH OF CHRIST IS THE PRICE OF THE NEW COVENANT

Good Friday
13 April 1979

Isaiah 52:13—53:12
Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9
John 18:1-19,42

Dear sisters and brothers, the liturgy today can be summed up in this idea: «The Death of Christ is the Price of the New Covenant». I want to insist on this theme of the covenant, which we have discussed all during Lent, so that we can penetrate more deeply into an understanding of our redemption. Since Old Testament times, God has presented himself to the people in the context of a covenant or a pact, which the prophets later translated into the form of a testament. That's how we get the titles «Old Testament» and «New Testament».

As we try to summarize the biblical message this evening in the expression, «The Death of Christ is the Price of the New Covenant», three exclamations come to mind: What a high price! But what a rich inheritance! And therefore, what a serious responsibility for those who are redeemed!

What a high price!

What a high price! That is what we spontaneously say when we hear the words of the dying Christ: «All has been accomplished» (John 19:30). He is the one who has paid humanity's debt, down to the last penny. He is the one whose own life brought to reality a project that God had been planning for centuries. We behold the heroic obedience of the Son of God who became man and as man submitted himself to the will of his Father in order to pay, with his heroic obedience, for the disobedience of all of us to the law of God.

The covenants God made with humankind through Noah, Abraham and Moses and the covenants announced by the prophets always required the death of victims. When Moses told the people about the covenant that God was going to make with them, animals were killed, the Bible tells us, and the blood of those animals was sprinkled partly on the altar and partly on the people themselves (Exod 24:5-6). It was by blood that the people were united with God. These elements of blood and death become even more pronounced when the prophets explain the nature of the covenant that God wants to make with humankind. It is not a covenant between equals. It involves the subordination of human beings to God. It is a grace and a gift of God to humankind. It is like an inheritance, and that's why the covenant is later called the testament. It's as if a father wants to leave his son an inheritance and so writes out a last will and testament.

The New Testament explains how the testator must die before a testament takes effect. This death on Good Friday, therefore, appears as the condition or the price to be paid so that all the messianic gifts that God promised humankind can be given as an inheritance. The testator has died. Christ plays here the painful role of the head of family who dies in order that his family might enjoy the inheritance that God has promised. Thus the dead Christ is the price of this covenant.

As we read of the suffering of Jesus Christ in today's three readings, we exclaim: what a high price! In today's first reading the prophet Isaiah presents us with the true man of sorrow—what ignominy and pain he had to bear! But he is not the one who ought to suffer; rather, he has made himself responsible and is suffering in the name of sinners. In this consists the tragedy of Christ; he was the innocent, beloved Son of the Father, and the Father, having accepted his generous offer to be responsible for human beings, charged him a painful death for everything that we owed to the Lord. Divine justice discharged on him the punishment that all of us deserved.

Christ was devastated on a cross. «We saw him», says the prophet, «and he did not appear human. He looked like a worm that crawls on the ground. He was devastated, a man of sorrows» (Isa 52:14; 53:3). This is the image of sin that is punished by God. Divine justice was charging, in the beloved person of his Son, everything that we owed so that all of us could be pardoned according to divine justice. We will never understand this mystery unless we understand the great respect that Christ had for his Father: «I do the will of my Father, and I obey my Father. This is my bread, to do what my Father desires» (John 4:34). Pain becomes meaningful and attains its redemptive value only when it is suffered in obedience.

It is sad to think of how many people are suffering without gaining any merit. Just think of the hospital wards—how many people are offering their pain to God in obedience to the Lord's plans? Reflect also on the many people who suffer in the world, and think about people's defiance of God's will. Instead of showing respect and obedience to the Father who is treating them as children who have been disobedient and rebellious, the unruly children keep crying out to the Father. Just think about how different that is from how Christ suffered and how much merit is being lost. How good it would be if we could only be obedient to the Father and give our suffering the same redemptive meaning as Christ did.

That's why the church preaches conversion to God. But we must also, dear brothers and sisters, discern between what God wants and what God does not want. There is a great deal of suffering that God does not want, but people are still causing it. In such cases, those who are sinning and abusing and attacking and torturing and killing are not doing God's will. They are contradicting the Lord. The victims, the oppressed, the suffering, and the tortured can do nothing but suffer, but these victims of injustice can offer this to God from the bottom of their hearts for the redemption of their people. And we should thank God that those many victims of unjust suffering have a real sense of solidarity with the people. But Christ, who was also sentenced to death and died unjustly from a human point of view, turned all that injustice and oppression into the saving power of the Lord. That's the way it should also be with all the suffering of our country, our families, our sisters and brothers—especially the suffering of poorest classes. May they experience their pain not with rebellious feelings but with a sense of accepting it from the Lord. We should struggle for just causes, but until a better world arrives,

we should know that our suffering is redemptive if it is offered from the depths of our hearts for the righting of injustices and for the building of the world that Jesus dreamed of.

Costly indeed is this covenant in which Christ has become involved as Redeemer! In the gospel that was just read we could follow, step by step, the tragic outcome of the price that Christ paid so willingly because he loved us.

What a precious covenant!

Let us study this precious covenant that Jesus Christ gives us this afternoon. His death is the price of this treasure we now have in our hands if we want to make use of it. The first reading announces that Christ's triumph over suffering will be as the dawn that brings to an end the night: «My servant will prosper; he will rise up and greatly prosper» (Isa 52:13). «When he hands over his life as an expiation, he will see his descendants and enjoy long life. What the Lord desires will prosper in his hands. He will justify many» (Isa 53:10-11).

The second reading also tells how Christ's sacrifice will be rewarded, for he will appear in heaven on a throne of grace and mercy; he will be a high priest, the «cause of eternal salvation» for all who place their hope in him (Heb 5:9). Christ has now attained this powerful status because the Father has added to his merits all that he endured this afternoon on Calvary.

The pierced side of Christ that is mentioned in today's gospel is a precious symbol of the eternal inheritance he leaves us. A soldier saw that Christ was already dead and that there was no need to break his legs, which was the horrible custom they had. While a crucified man could still breathe, he stayed alive. Despite the great pain of stretching his legs on the nails embedded in his muscles, he could still lift his chest a little and manage to breathe. Thanks to that little air that reached his lungs he stayed alive. But when the executioners wanted him to die, they would break his legs. Then he couldn't keep lifting himself up to catch his breath. The crucified man would die asphyxiated. Suffocation was part of the horrible torture of the cross. But when the soldier came to break the legs of the crucified Jesus, he saw that he was already dead. Nevertheless, a soldier thrust his lance into the heart of Jesus Christ, who in a gesture of generosity let the last drops of his heart escape: blood and water. That piercing of the side of Christ has inspired great mysticism. The ancient fathers of the church say that «it was there that the church was born, in the pierced side of Christ»¹. Those two rivers of blood and water were the redeeming power that would work through the sacraments to cleanse the world of sin.

But I want to take note, sisters and brothers, of how that heritage took the form of what we Catholics call the Seven Words that Christ pronounced on the cross. There is no time today to analyze them in all their depth, but we do want to recall them with love since we are heirs of a testator who died in horrible agony. Along with the drops of his blood, these words sum up the meaning of God's covenant with humankind.

«Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing» (Luke 23:34). This is the greatest good flowing from redemption: God's forgiveness of our sins. There is no joy greater than that of conversion. That's why during Holy Week all of us who are Christians should savor the sweetness of this word of Christ about the forgiveness of sins.

¹ SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Homilies*, MG 51, 229.

Christ addressed his second word precisely to a converted man, the thief beside him who asked to be remembered in his kingdom: «Remember me when you arrive in your kingdom. I have faith that you are the Son of God. I believe in your innocence. We are dying because we are guilty, but you are not guilty». The thief defended Christ, who responded to him, «In truth I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise» (Luke 23:42-43). This is another precious legacy that Christ leaves us: the transcendence of our hopes and the expectation of a kingdom. Even if we die like the good thief, as victims of our own crimes and captives of our own miseries, we can always give a sigh of hope: «Remember me when you are in your kingdom». Christ will always stretch out his arms to carry us to his kingdom if we truly turn to him.

The third hushed word of Christ was a bequest for his own mother: «Woman, behold your son». Then to all of us, in the person of John, he directs the word: «Behold your mother» (John 19:26-27). From that moment on an intimate relationship was established between Mary and all Christians, and every hour millions of *Ave Marias* rise from our lips to Mary on her throne of maternal tenderness.

On the cross Christ experienced loneliness and anguish. Feeling abandoned by the Father, his heroic obedience was tested, and so the fourth word arose: «My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?» (Mark 15:34). Christ was not abandoned, but he certainly felt all the pain and anguish that the human heart must suffer in the course of life. It is the psychological suffering of feeling all alone, completely abandoned, with no one who understands. In his loneliness Christ left us that word of distress to help us in our prayer and devotion and to strengthen our faith in the one true God. God is not failing us when we do not feel his presence. We shouldn't say, «God doesn't help me with what I earnestly pray for, and so I'll pray no more». God exists, and the further away he seems to be, the more he exists! When you think that God is far away and doesn't hear you, that is when he is closest to you. When you feel anguish and want God to draw close because you feel his absence, that is when God is very close to your distress. When are we going to understand that God doesn't give us only happiness? He also tests our faithfulness during our moments of distress. Our prayer and our devotion have more merit when we remain faithful even though the Lord seems far away. May this cry of Christ teach us that God is always a Father who never abandons us and that we are closer to him than we think.

Reaching the height of his agony, Christ knew that one detail found in all the scriptural prophecies of salvation had yet to be fulfilled: «For my thirst they gave me vinegar» (Ps 69:22). He brought about the fulfillment of this passage with his fifth word: «I thirst», after which a soldier moistened a sponge with vinegar and rudely squeezed it against the lips of the dying Christ.

When this detail of Scripture was thus also fulfilled, Christ pronounced the words, «All has been accomplished» (John 19:30). By that he meant: «All the details have been set in place for this tragic covenant as planned by my Father. My pain has been the price paid so that he might bless humankind». Dear sisters and brothers, which of us wouldn't want our lives to be lived in fulfillment of the Father's will? It should make us sad, I repeat again, to think about all those lives being lived without caring about the will of God or even opposed to it. Think of all the people who are looking for happiness on paths other than those God points out to us! Think

of all those who die without being able to say, as Christ did, «All has been accomplished»! How horrible it is that they have to say, «My life has been totally opposed to the will of the Father. My life has rejected the love God asked of me. My life has been one of crimes and violence and hatred». Let us not waste our lives on paths that lead us where God does not want us to go. Let us walk toward the place where we want to be found at the moment when God asks us to account for our existence. How wonderful it would be if we could say with Christ, «All has been accomplished. During my life I have been a poem composed by God and made real by myself. I have become what God wanted me to be. I have followed the vocation God gave me. I have tried to be everything God wanted me to be».

Seeing that all had been accomplished, he uttered the final words, «Father, into your hands I commend my spirit» (Luke 23:46). Again, transcendence. Sisters and brothers, our lives are not going to end up in the grave. Our lives are not going to be simply a part of history. Our lives are not going to be limited to the applause given our achievements. All that is blown away with the wind. What counts is placing our souls in the hands of God. When my spirit is received by the Lord, he will reward it or punish it. This should be the goal toward which we aspire in every moment of our existence.

What a great inheritance is ours! How precious is this covenant that God makes with us, bought dearly with the pain of his own Son!

What a serious responsibility!

I conclude therefore with this third consideration: what a serious responsibility we have as redeemed men and women! Today's readings from the letter to the Hebrews invites us to reflect on this: «Let us remain firm in the faith», it tells us; «let us confidently approach the throne of grace» (Heb 4:14,16). At the end of the passion narrative in today's gospel, Saint John writes, «The one who saw this gives testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he is telling the truth so that you also may believe» (John 19:35). This is our responsibility: to have faith and to have hope. Let pessimism be far from us! Let despair be far from us! We shouldn't let our national situation discourage us during this Holy Week. God is very close to us. The price of our redemption has been very high, and God is ready to give us his mercy and his redemption. Only one thing is lacking: that we who have been redeemed have faith, that we who have been redeemed have confidence in the Lord, that by our Christian action we show our appreciation for what God has paid for us, that we take possession of the gifts of redemption, and that we place a kiss on the cross of Jesus Christ, as we are about to do momentarily. Let us say, «Hail, holy cross, you are the only hope for our lives and our history!»

Let us make redemption real, sisters and brothers. Let us make our small contribution to complete the painful price Christ paid. Let us offer our pains, our sufferings, our surrender, our faith, our identification with the Redeemer, for that is all he wants of us: that we place our faith and hope in him. Let it be so.