



The Holy See

WAY OF THE CROSS AT THE COLOSSEUM *ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI*

Good Friday, 10 April 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

At the end of his dramatic Passion narrative, the Evangelist Saint Mark tells us: “The centurion, who stood facing him, saw that he thus breathed his last, and said: ‘Truly this man was the Son of God!’” (*Mk 15:39*). We cannot fail to be surprised by the profession of faith of this Roman soldier, who had been present throughout the various phases of the Crucifixion. When the darkness of night was falling on that Friday so unlike any other in history, when the sacrifice of the Cross was already consummated and the bystanders were making haste to celebrate the Jewish Passover in the usual way, these few words, wrung from the lips of a nameless commander in the Roman army, resounded through the silence that surrounded that most singular death. This Roman army officer, having witnessed the execution of one of countless condemned prisoners, was able to recognize in this crucified man the Son of God, who had perished in the most humiliating abandonment. His shameful end ought to have marked the definitive triumph of hatred and death over love and life. But it was not so! Hanging from the Cross on Golgotha was a man who was already dead, but that man was acknowledged to be the “Son of God” by the centurion, “on seeing that he thus breathed his last”, as the Evangelist specifies.

We are reminded of this soldier’s profession of faith every time we listen anew to the Passion according to Saint Mark. This evening, like the centurion, we pause to gaze on the lifeless face of the Crucified One at the conclusion of this traditional *Via Crucis* which, through the radio and television coverage, has brought many people together from every part of the world. We have re-lived the tragic event of a man unique in the history of all times, who changed the world not by killing others but by letting himself be killed as he hung from a cross. This man, seemingly one of us, who while he was being killed forgave his executioners, is the “Son of God”, who, as the Apostle Paul reminds us, “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied

himself, taking the form of a servant ... he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (*Phil 2:7-8*).

The anguish of the Passion of the Lord Jesus cannot fail to move to pity even the most hardened hearts, as it constitutes the climax of the revelation of God's love for each of us. Saint John observes: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (*Jn 3:16*). It is for love of us that Christ dies on the cross!

Throughout the course of the millennia, a great multitude of men and women have been drawn deeply into this mystery and they have followed him, making in their turn, like him and with his help, a gift to others of their own lives. They are the saints and the martyrs, many of whom remain unknown to us. Even in our own time, how many people, in the silence of their daily lives, unite their sufferings with those of the Crucified One and become apostles of a true spiritual and social renewal! What would man be without Christ? Saint Augustine observes: "You would still be in a state of wretchedness, had He not shown you mercy. You would not have returned to life, had He not shared your death. You would have passed away had He not come to your aid. You would be lost, had He not come" (*Discourse 185:1*). So why not welcome him into our lives?

Let us pause this evening to contemplate his disfigured face: it is the face of the Man of sorrows, who took upon himself the burden of all our mortal anguish. His face is reflected in that of every person who is humiliated and offended, sick and suffering, alone, abandoned and despised. Pouring out his blood, he has rescued us from the slavery of death, he has broken the solitude of our tears, he has entered into our every grief and our every anxiety.

Brothers and Sisters! As the Cross rises up on Golgotha, the eyes of our faith are already turned towards the dawning of the new Day, and we begin to taste the joy and splendour of Easter. "If we have died with Christ", writes Saint Paul, "we believe that we shall also live with Him" (*Rom 6:8*). In this certainty, let us continue our journey. Tomorrow, on Holy Saturday, we will watch and pray. And now, let us pray together with Mary, the Sorrowful Virgin, let us pray with all who are sorrowful, and especially with all the suffering people from the earthquake zone in L'Aquila: let us pray that in this dark night, the star of hope will appear also to them, the light of the Risen Lord.

I wish all of you, even now, a Happy Easter in the light of the Risen Lord!