



The Holy See

EASTER VIGIL

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Vatican Basilica

Holy Saturday, 14 April 1979

1. The word "death" sticks in one's throat. Although humanity has, during so many generations, become accustomed in a way to the reality of death and to its inevitability, it is, however, something overwhelming every time.

Christ's death had entered deeply the hearts of those closest to him, and the consciousness of the whole of Jerusalem. The silence that followed it filled the Friday evening and the whole of the following Saturday. On this day, in accordance with Jewish regulations, no one had gone to the place of his burial. The three women, of whom today's Gospel speaks, well remember the heavy stone with which the entrance to the sepulchre had been closed. *This stone*, of which they were thinking and about which they would speak the next day on their way to the sepulchre, also symbolizes the weight that *had crushed their hearts*. The stone that had separated the Dead One from the living, the stone that marked the limit of life, the weight of death. The women, who go to the sepulchre in the early morning of the day after the Sabbath, will not speak of death, but of the stone.

When they arrive at the spot, they will see that the stone no longer blocks the entrance to the sepulchre. It has been rolled back. They will not find Jesus in the sepulchre. They looked for him in vain! "He is not here; for he has risen, as he said" (Mt 28:6). They are to go back to the city and announce to the disciples that he has risen again and that they will see him in Galilee. The women are not able to utter a word. The news of death is spoken in a low voice. The words of the resurrection were even difficult for them to grasp. *Difficult to repeat*, so much has the reality of death influenced man's thought and heart.

2. Since that night and even more so since that morning which followed it, Christ's disciples have learned to utter the word "resurrection". And it has become the most important word, the central word, the fundamental word in their language. Everything takes its origin again from it. Everything is confirmed and is constructed again: "The stone which the builders rejected *has become the chief cornerstone*. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day which the Lord has made: let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 117 (118): 22-24).

It is for this very reason that the paschal vigil—the day following Good Friday—is no longer only the day on which the word "death" is spoken in a low voice, on which the last moments of the life of the Dead Man are remembered: *it is the day of a great Awaiting*. It is the Easter Vigil: the day and the night of waiting for the Day which the Lord has made.

The liturgical content of the Vigil is expressed by means of the various hours of the breviary and is then concentrated with all its riches in this liturgy of the night, which reaches its climax, after the period of Lent, in the first "Alleluia".

Alleluia: the cry that expresses paschal joy!

The exclamation that rings out again in the middle of the night of waiting and brings with it already the joy of the morning. It brings with it the certainty of resurrection. That which, at the first moment, the lips of the women in front of the sepulchre or the mouths of the apostles did not have the courage to utter, now the Church, thanks to their testimony, expresses with her Alleluia.

This song of joy, sung about midnight, announces to us the Great Day. (In some Slav languages, Easter is called the "Great Night" after the Great Night there arrives the Great Day: "the day which the Lord has made").

3. And now we are about to meet this Great Day with the paschal fire lit; we have lit the candle—Christ's light—from this fire and proclaimed beside it the glory of his Resurrection in the song of the *Exsultet*. Then we entered, by means of a series of readings, the process of the great announcement of creation, of the world, of man, of the People of God; we entered the preparation of the whole of creation for this Great Day, the day of the victory of good over evil, of Life over death. It is not possible to grasp the mystery of the Resurrection except by returning to the origins and following, thereafter, the whole development of the history of the economy of salvation up to that Moment! To the moment in which the three women of Jerusalem, stopping at the threshold of the empty sepulchre, heard the message of a young man dressed in a white robe "Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here" (Mk 16:5-6).

4. That great Moment does not allow us to remain outside ourselves; it compels us to enter our own humanity. Christ not only revealed to us the victory of life over death, but brought us, with his

Resurrection, the New Life. He gave us this new life.

Here is how St Paul puts it: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6: 3-4).

The words: "(we) were baptized into his death" say a great deal. Death is the water in which Life is won back: the water "welling up to eternal life" (Jn 4:14). It is necessary to "immerse oneself" in this water, in this Death, *in order then to emerge from it as a New Man*, as a New Creature, as a new being, that is, *vivified by the Power of the Resurrection of Christ!*

This is the mystery of the Water, which we bless tonight, which we cause to be penetrated with the "light of Christ, with the New Life; it is the symbol of the power of the Resurrection!

This Water becomes, in the Sacrament of Baptism, the sign of the victory over Satan, over sin; the sign of *the victory* that Christ won by means of the cross, by means of Death and which he then brings to each of us: "Our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin" (Rom 6:6).

5. This is the night of the Great Awaiting. Let us wait in Faith, let us wait with all our human being for him who at dawn broke the tyranny of death and revealed the Divine Power of Life: He is our Hope.

© Copyright 1979 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana