



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

**MASS AND CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT
OF THE ANOINTING OF THE SICK**

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

*Campus of the Arizona State University, Phoenix
Monday, 14 September 1987*

“The Son of Man must be lifted up” (*Io. 3, 14*).

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. On this day when I have the joy of celebrating the Eucharist with you here in Phoenix, let our first thoughts be directed to *the victorious Cross* of our Saviour, to the Son of Man who is lifted up! Let us adore and praise Christ, our Crucified and Risen Lord. To him, and to the Father and the Holy Spirit, be glory and thanksgiving now and forever!

How good it is to join our voices in praise of God on this *feast of the Triumph of the Cross*. And how appropriate to celebrate the feast here in the city of *Phoenix*, which bears the name of an ancient symbol often depicted in Christian art to represent the meaning of the victorious Cross. The phoenix was a legendary bird that, after dying, rose again from its own ashes. Thus, it came to be a symbol of Christ who, after dying on the Cross, rose again in triumph over sin and death.

We can rightly say that, by divine providence, the Church in Phoenix has been called in a particular way to *live the mystery of the victory of the Cross*. Certainly, the Cross of Christ has marked the progress of evangelization in this area since its beginning: from the day, three hundred years ago, when Father *Eusebio Kino* first brought the Gospel to Arizona. The Good News of

salvation has brought forth great fruit here in Phoenix, in Tucson and throughout this whole area. The Cross is indeed *the Tree of Life*.

2. "*The Son of Man must be lifted up*" (Io. 3, 14).

Today the Church makes special reference to these words of Christ as she celebrates the feast of the Triumph of the Cross. Beyond the particular historical circumstances that contributed to the introduction of this feast in the liturgical calendar, there remain these words that Christ spoke *to Nicodemus* during that conversation which took place at night: "The Son of Man must be lifted up".

Nicodemus, as we know, was a man who loved God's word and who studied the word with great attention. Prompted by his hunger for the truth, by his eagerness to understand, Nicodemus came to Jesus at night to find answers to his questions and doubts. It is precisely to him, to Nicodemus, that Jesus speaks these words which still echo in a mysterious way: "The Son of Man must be lifted up, *that all who believe may have eternal life in him*" (*Ibid.* 3, 14-15).

Nicodemus could not have known at this point that these words contain, in a certain sense, the summary of the whole Paschal Mystery which would crown the messianic mission of Jesus of Nazareth. *When Jesus spoke of being "lifted up" he was thinking of the Cross on Calvary*: being lifted up on the Cross, being lifted up *by means* of the Cross. Nicodemus could not have guessed this at the time. And so *Christ referred to an event from the history of the Old Testament* which he knew about, namely, Moses lifting up the serpent in the desert.

3. It was an unusual event that took place *during Israel's journey from Egypt to the Promised Land*. This journey that lasted forty years was full of tests: *the people "tested" God* with their infidelity and lack of trust; in turn this provoked *many tests from the Lord* in order to purify Israel's faith and deepen it. Near Mount Hor a particular test took place, which was that of the *poisonous serpents*. These serpents "bit the people" with the result that many of them died (*Nu.* 21, 6). Then *Moses*, ordered by the Lord, "*made a bronze serpent* and mounted it on a pole, and whenever anyone who had been bitten by a serpent looked at the bronze serpent, he recovered" (*Ibid.* 21, 9).

We might ask: why such a test? *The Lord had chosen Israel to be his own*; he had chosen this people, in order to initiate them gradually into his plan of salvation.

4. Jesus of Nazareth explains the salvific designs of the God of the Covenant. *The bronze serpent in the desert was the symbolic figure of the Crucified One*. Is someone who had been bitten looked upon the serpent "lifted up" by Moses on a high pole, that person was saved. He remained alive, not because he had looked upon the serpent, but because *he had believed in the power of God* and his saving love. Thus when the Son of Man is lifted up on the Cross of Calvary, "all who believe will have eternal life in him" (Cfr. *Io.* 3, 15).

There exists then a profound *analogy between that figure and this reality*, between that sign of salvation and this reality of salvation contained in the Cross of Christ. The analogy becomes even more striking if we keep in mind that the salvation from physical death, caused by the poison of the serpents in the desert, came about through a serpent. *Salvation from spiritual death* - the death that is sin and that was caused by man - *came about through a Man*, through the Son of Man "lifted up" on the Cross.

In this nighttime conversation, Jesus of Nazareth helps Nicodemus to discover the true sense of God's designs. While Jesus is speaking, *the fulfilment of these divine designs belongs to the future*, but at this point the future is not far away Nicodemus himself will be a witness to this fulfilment. He will be a witness to the paschal events in Jerusalem. *He will be a witness* to the Cross, upon which the one who speaks with him this night - the Son of Man - will be lifted up.

5. Jesus goes on even further. The conversation becomes even deeper: *Why the Cross? Why must the Son of Man be "lifted up" on the wood of the Cross? Because "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son* that whoever believes in him may not die but may have eternal life" (Io. 3, 16). Yes, eternal life. This is the type of salvation that Jesus is speaking about: *eternal life in God*.

And then Jesus adds: "God did *not* send the Son into the world *to condemn the world*, but that the world might be saved through him" (*Ibid.* 3, 17). Many thought that the Messiah would be first of all *a severe judge* who would punish, "separating the wheat from the chaff" (Cfr. *Matth.* 3, 12). If at one moment he will have to come as judge - at the end of the world - now "in the fullness of time" (Cfr. *Gal.* 4, 4) *he comes to be judged himself by the sins of the world*, and therefore because of the sins of the world. And thus, Christ lifted up on the Cross becomes the Redeemer of the human race, the Redeemer of the world.

Jesus of Nazareth prepares Nicodemus, the eager student of the Scriptures, so that in time *he will understand the saving mystery contained in the Cross of Christ*. And we know that, in time, Nicodemus did understand, but not during that night.

6. *What, then, does this "being lifted up" mean?*

In the second reading of today's liturgy, taken from Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians, *"being lifted up" means first of all "being brought low"*. The Apostle writes about Christ, saying: "Though he was in the form of God, he did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at. Rather, he emptied himself and *took the form of a slave*, being born *in the likeness of men*" (*Phil.* 2, 6-7). The Godman! God becoming man. God taking on our humanity: this is the first dimension of "being brought low", and at the same time it is a "lifting up". God is brought low, so that man may be lifted up. Why? *Because "God so loved the world"*. Because he is love!

Then the Apostle writes: "(Christ) was known to be of human estate, and it was thus that *he humbled himself, obediently accepting death, death on a Cross*" (*Ibid.* 2, 7-8). This is the *second and the definitive dimension of being brought low*. It is the dimension of being emptied which confirms in the strongest way the truth of those words: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son". He *gave*. *This emptying is itself the gift*. It is the greatest gift of the Father. It surpasses all other gifts. It is the source of every gift. In this absolute lowering, in this emptying, is the beginning and source of every "lifting up", *the source of the lifting up of humanity*.

7. The Cross was "lifted up" on Golgotha. And Jesus was nailed to the Cross, and was therefore lifted up with it. To the human eye, this was *the culmination of humiliation and disgrace*. But *in the eyes of God* it was different. It was different in the eternal designs of God.

The Apostle continues: "Because of this, God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every other name, so that at Jesus' name every knee must bend in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth, and every tongue proclaim to the glory of God the Father: *Jesus Christ is Lord*" (*Ibid.* 2, 9-11).

Christ *is* the Lord! This will be confirmed in the Resurrection, but it is *already* contained in the *Crucifixion*. Precisely in the *Crucifixion*.

To be crucified, humanly speaking, is to be disgraced and humiliated. But from God's point of view it means being lifted up, indeed, to be lifted up by means of the Cross. Christ is the Lord, and he becomes Lord of everything and everyone in this elevation by means of the Cross. It is in this way that we look upon the Cross, with the eyes of faith, *instructed by the word of God*, guided by the power of God.

Here then is the mystery of *the Triumph of the Cross*.

8. This mystery reaches us in a particular way and with a special power when the Church celebrates *the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick*, as she does this evening. By means of this sacrament, and through all her pastoral service, the Church continues *to care for the sick and dying as Jesus did* during his earthly ministry. Through the laying on of hands by the priest, the anointing with oil and the prayers, our brothers and sisters are strengthened with the grace of the Holy Spirit. They are enabled to bear their sufferings with courage and thus to embrace the Cross and follow after Christ with stronger faith and hope.

This holy anointing does not prevent physical death, nor does it promise a miraculous healing of the human body. But it does bring *special grace and consolation to those who are dying*, preparing them to meet our loving Saviour with lively faith and love, and with firm hope for eternal life. It also brings *comfort and strength to those who are not dying* but who are suffering from serious illness or advanced age. For these the Church seeks healing of both body and soul, praying that the

whole person may be renewed by the power of the holy Spirit.

Every time that the Church celebrates this sacrament, she is *proclaiming her belief in the victory of the Cross*. It is as if she were repeating the words of Saint Paul: "I am certain that *neither death nor life*, neither angels nor principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor powers, neither height nor depth nor any other creature, *will be able to separate us from the love of God* that comes to us in Christ Jesus, our Lord" (*Rom. 8, 38-39*).

From the very early days until now, Phoenix has been a city to which people have come for health care, for relief of suffering, for new beginnings and fresh starts. Today as in the past, the Church welcomes such people, offering them love and understanding. She is grateful to the sick and elderly for the special mission which they fulfill in the Kingdom of our Saviour. Your hospitality, which I myself have also received, reflects the beautiful saying in Spanish: "*mi casa, su casa*". I pray that you will always remain faithful to this tradition of Christian community and generous service.

By such fidelity to your Christian heritage, through the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, and in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, you express your deep conviction that suffering and death are not the last words of life. The last word is the Word made flesh, *the Crucified and Risen Christ*.

9. The responsorial psalm of today's liturgy exhorts us:

"*Hearken, my people, to my teaching;*
Incline your ears to the words of my mouth . . .
I will utter mysteries from of old" (*Ps. 78 (77), 1-2*).

It was exactly in this way that Christ revealed the mystery of salvation to Nicodemus, and to us.
And to all people.

The words which follow, in that same psalm, also refer to us:

"*But they flattered him with their mouths*
and lied to him with their tongues,
Though their hearts were not steadfast towards him,
nor were they faithful to his covenant" (*Ibid. 36-37*).

And nevertheless:

"While he slew them they sought him
and inquired after God again;
Remembering that *God was their rock*

and the Most High God, *their Redeemer*" (*Ibid.* 34-35).

And this is how God continues among us, from one generation to the next, as our Rock, our Redeemer. This is *the mystery of the Triumph of the Cross, the rock of our salvation*.

Let us fix our gaze upon the Cross!

Let us be reborn from it!

Let us return to God!

May the humiliation of Christ - his being brought low by means of the Cross - serve once again to lift up humanity towards God. *Sursum corda!* Lift up your hearts! Amen.

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