Meditations for the Opening Retreat of the 48th General Chapter

(07 October 2024)

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We ask you, O Father, by the death of your Son on the cross, to open our hearts to the knowledge of your Word. We pray that this experience does not frighten us, but that we embrace it with patience, minute by minute, in the certainty that you also lead us through the moments of silence, of aridity, of weariness, of desert, because you are greater than we are and our heart finds rest only in you. (Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini).

Our Lady of the Word and of silence, pray for us.

First part

I would like to begin this Retreat by recalling the words of the Holy Father in the audience he granted us on the occasion of the last General Chapter: “At the heart of your life and your mission is the Passion of Jesus, which the Founder described as "the greatest and most overwhelming work of God’s love" (Letters II, 499). The vow that distinguishes you, with which you undertake to keep alive the memory of the Passion, places you at the foot of the cross, from which springs the healing and reconciling love of God. I encourage you to be ministers of spiritual healing and reconciliation, which are greatly needed in today's world, marked by ancient and new afflictions. Your Constitutions call you to dedicate yourselves to the "evangelizing and... re-evangelizing the faithful, especially the poor in more neglected areas" (Const. 70). Your closeness to people, traditionally expressed through popular missions, spiritual direction and the sacrament of Penance, is a precious testimony. The Church needs ministers who speak with tenderness, listen without condemnation and accept with mercy.

The Church today strongly perceives the call to come out of itself and go to the peripheries, both geographic and existential. Your commitment to embrace new frontiers of mission implies not only going to new territories to

bring the Gospel, but also addressing the new challenges of our time, such as migrations, secularism and the digital world. This means being present in those situations where people perceive the absence of God, and try to be close to those who, in any way or form, are suffering." (Consistory Hall, 22/10/2018) This is a real life project!

It is proper to our Congregation to constantly keep alive the "Memoria Passionis". To recall, the *zikkaron*, is not simply to remember something from the past, much less, to fix our attention on it, but to bring it into the present, to be present to the same reality, although in ways that are always different and new. It is to be present to the past, to make the past a reality today, preparing for future experiences, aware of the strength of what, in time, was left behind. Thus, for us the Passion is a fact that is always present and active in our life. In this way we find life in death, strength in fragility and hope in suffering.

Another way of saying "memory" is "to keep before our eyes", to direct our gaze. We have, then, the Passion of the Lord constantly before our eyes. We see Jesus suffering, like the Servant of Isaiah 53, and many other characters of the Old Testament who suffer, like Jeremiah and Job, like so many who in the Psalms present collective or individual supplications (cf. Psalms 22, 31, 69). We look and see in Jesus the suffering of the world, of wounded nature and of destroyed humanities.

We can see our suffering brothers and sisters and all that St. Paul of the Cross had to suffer, and in his footsteps, St. Gabriel of Our Lady of Sorrows and St. Gemma Galgani. We also perceive the gaze of the Father towards his Son, who when he sees him crushed by human wickedness, declares-- *"This is my beloved Son".* He whom the Father presents as his beloved Son and whom in his paternal love he destines to be sacrificed. The heavenly voice takes the form of the love of a Father who sacrifices himself by sending his Son to death (cf. Jean Galot). We see Jesus reflected in us and we see ourselves reflected in Jesus. The great gift of love-- we can see ourselves reflected in Jesus.

The most important moment of remembrance is the celebration of the Eucharist. Presence and enactment of the great Eucharist that began at the Last Supper, that continued at the cross and that today is prolonged in the passion of so many people near and far, in wars, in injustice, hunger, prejudice, abandonment, in the many forms solitude, in destroyed nature

(fires, floods, meteorological phenomena of all kinds). “Regrettably, many efforts to seek concrete solutions to the environmental crisis have proved ineffective, not only because of powerful opposition but also because of a more general lack of interest. Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions. We require a new and universal solidarity” (Cf. Laudato Si 14).

Each one of us bears the signs of Jesus' death (cf. 2 Cor 4:10a). How do we live our passion?

Its fruit is to identify us with Jesus, mainly with the understanding of the Lord's Passion. Accepting the cross cannot be self-punishment or a kind of masochism. When we suffer we become united to and in solidarity with so many people who suffer. The suffering Messiah took on the infirmities of the people and bore their sins. Our suffering is a struggle against comfort and indifference. It is to renounce ourselves in order to liberate people. It is to overcome the structures of pain in order to give life. Thus, Passion becomes mission-- to give life in death, to give strength in fragility, to give hope in suffering.

When we pray the rosary we meditation on the Sorrowful Mysteries. They too help us to keep alive the *"Memoria Passionis"* and to deepen our devotion to the great mystery of the Passion, the ultimate moment of our redemption, together with the Resurrection of Jesus.

The first mystery proposes that we contemplate the agony of Jesus in the Garden of Olives. It is the mystery of the human being. Jesus assumed our humanity and here we see how his humanity is manifested as never before-- the mystery of his humanity. In trial and struggle, human anguish is expressed with profound sadness and terror in the face of human weakness. Loneliness hurts and the search for companionship is frustrated. His body, his blood, become so vulnerable in order to atone for so much insensitivity. Jesus' humanity can be seen in his relationship with the Father, and in all that he lived during the greater part of his human existence, including his relationship with Mary and Joseph-- *"he was subject to them"*. Jesus has full confidence and surrenders to the will of the Father. He himself taught us to say to the Father-- *"Thy will be done".* He is God, but he wanted to be human and to experience all forms of human suffering. Here is a human God and the

humanity of God. In his agony, perhaps Jesus was aware of the absurd suffering that would befall him. However, He did not turn back. The chalice is filled to the brim. He is willing to drink it to the last drop. Would His divine wisdom see into the future and perceive that the drowsy indifference and abandonment of the disciples prefigured the irrationality and lack of logic of humanity attached to sin? He did everything, but men prefer themselves, failure oppresses their hearts. Each one of us is like an earthen vessel containing a priceless treasure and in it we clearly perceive our human frailty. It is difficult to realize that we are so great and yet so small. Contemplating our human reality, we discover ourselves to be so sublime and, at the same time, capable of even abominable things. The same mystery, so sublime and yet held in our hands, is often a source of inexplicable anguish and sadness. Many are tormented by loneliness. Even the affection of God seems unattainable. We may also have the feeling of uselessness, of failure, of efforts made in vain. We are human. How can we say: *"Thy will be done" and not mine?*

Jesus, with absolute courage, assumed pain and death including the silence of the Father.

How did St. Paul of the Cross live as a human being? How did He fulfill the mission of sharing the suffering of humanity?

The second mystery proposed to Christians in the rosary is the scourging of Jesus. It is the mystery of acceptance. The Gospels are strangely vague in speaking about the scourging imposed on Jesus. They simply say that Pilate ordered him to be scourged. The scourging was a torture that preceded the crucifixion of the condemned. It was extremely cruel, draining strength in an attempt to hasten death. From what was discovered during studies that were done, we know what happened. The flesh of the condemned was torn and the humiliation was even more painful. Jesus submitted to the painful procedure as if to denounce the search for comforts and satisfactions proper to humanity, culturally enthroned in our time. Jesus accepts what they do. It is the great mystery of acceptance. He accepts for our sake. All around us there are many tortured bodies, broken hearts, destroyed lives, humanity wounded by its own hands. Wounds inflicted by others and wounds that are self-inflicted. Wars, terrorism, violence, forced migrations, multitudes of refugees--the scourging is renewed, and it acquires new form, but it is always painful.

“There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. They are not recognized by international conventions as refugees; they bear the loss of the lives they have left behind, without enjoying any legal protection whatsoever. Sadly, there is widespread indifference to such suffering, which is even now taking place throughout our world. Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded.” (LS 25)

We too are constantly scourged, and what is stated in 2 Cor 4:8-11 can also apply to us. We are called to relive the mystery of acceptance. United to Jesus, our sufferings also become his sufferings. He suffers with us and in us. How can we live our mission to be with those who suffer and heal their wounds? How did St. Paul of the Cross live the mystery of acceptance?

As we continue to implement the *"Memoria Passionis"* we now consider Jesus crowned with thorns and the mystery of being nothing. The brevity of the description of the scene of the crowning with thorns is like a violent blow to the conscience of the reader of the Gospel text (Jn 19:2; Mt 27:29; Mk 15:17). The immensity of the cruelty is comparable to the degree of injustice. Pilate, indifferent to any suffering, thinks only of maintaining his position, his power.

“Politics must pay greater attention to foreseeing new conflicts and addressing the causes which can lead to them. But powerful financial interests prove most resistant to this effort, and political planning tends to lack breadth of vision. What would induce anyone, at this stage, to hold on to power only to be remembered for their inability to take action when it was urgent and necessary to do so?” (LS 57)

Pope Francis said: “our world demands of all government leaders a will which is effective, practical and constant, concrete steps and immediate measures for preserving and improving the natural environment and thus putting an end as quickly as possible to the phenomenon of social and economic exclusion, with its baneful consequences” (Speech at the UM, 25/09/2015).

A crown, a symbol of superiority, of position, of power, is here the sign of the greatest mockery and humiliation. However, the one who is truly great is

the one they wanted to humiliate. The irony of the scene, the grotesque imitation of an enthronement, in reality reveals the lowest level of the one who humiliates, of the one who uses the other as a springboard. At the same time, it tells us that Jesus, by his humiliation, received the name that is above every name. To be reduced to nothing is the concreteness of *kenosis*, of the descent that is the ultimate elevation. Jesus accepts to become nothing so that all may receive the fullness of his life.

In the life of the Church and of the world, how many have sought to occupy positions of glory?... and the effect has always been disastrous. How many have sought to elevate themselves by trampling on life, on the honor of people, denying opportunities, exploiting, lying. Pride, arrogance, authoritarianism, careerism, stardom, etc. have caused so much oppression. Jesus chose to become nothing. Instead of laurels, he was crowned with thorns. He who told us to assume the last place, occupied it in such a way that no one can occupy it. Our place, then, is always the penultimate one.

How can we live the mission of being at the side of the last, of those whom the world reduces to nothing? How did St. Paul of the Cross live in this way?