



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO ZIMBABWE, BOTSWANA, LESOTHO, SWAZILAND AND MOZAMBIQUE

HOLY MASS IN THE PRO-CATHEDRAL OF ROMA (LESOTHO)

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

*Feast of the Triumph of the Cross
Wednesday, 14 September 1988*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. Today it is my great joy to be together with you, the faithful of the Church in Lesotho, on *the feast of the Triumph of the Cross*, celebrating the Eucharistic Liturgy which in the Cross of Christ has its beginning and source.

I give thanks to God for the privilege of being here *in Roma* where Father Joseph Gérard served Christ for many years. In the love of Jesus, I offer cordial greetings to my brother bishop and to the priests and religious of this beloved country, as well as to those from other lands. In a special way, I greet the parents and their children, the families of Lesotho who form the primary communities of society and of the Church. I welcome the catechists and teachers who perform such a vital role in the work of evangelization in this mountainous and rugged land, and I offer warm greetings to the various Lay Associations: to the members of the Legion of Mary, the Saint Cecilia Association, the Ladies of Saint Ann and the Men of the Sacred Heart.

I also extend a warm welcome to our brothers and sisters in Christ from other Churches and Ecclesial Communities and to all those of good will who have wished to join us today in prayer.

2. In the Gospel of this feast we are *witnesses* of an unusual *conversation* between *Jesus and Nicodemus*. The conversation takes place at night because Nicodemus, a prominent Jew, went to talk with Christ under the cover of darkness. Christ leads this man, a teacher, *to the very heart of*

the mystery revealed by God. It is the mystery of the Son of God who descended from heaven and, as the Son of Man, accomplished the messianic mission among the people of Israel.

This mission was directed towards “the lifting up” of Christ on the Cross. Jesus says to Nicodemus: “The Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert” (Jo. 3, 14). *Nicodemus knows the Scriptures* well; he knows the inspired message of the Old Testament. He can recall the event that took place during the journey of the chosen people in the desert. At the command of Yahweh, “Moses fashioned a bronze serpent which he put on a standard” (Nu. 21, 9).

This *bronze serpent would restore to health* and save the lives of the Israelites who had been bitten by the serpents. They were serpents with a poisonous venom; after being bitten by them many Israelites died. But the serpent made of bronze and placed on a high standard *would become a means of salvation*: whoever looked at it would live.

3. Jesus continues: “*The Son of Man must be lifted up...* so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him” (Jo. 3, 14-15). The human family had received at the very beginning of earthly history a deadly bite from the “ancient serpent”. He had injected a satanic venom – the venom of original sin – into the souls of the first man and woman. And from that time onward, man’s history on earth has been burdened by sin. A tendency towards sin has generated many evils in the lives of individual persons and the communities to which they belong, in families, in entire peoples and nations.

“*The Son of Man must be lifted up*”, says Jesus to Nicodemus. And he says this with a view to his crucifixion: The Son of Man must be lifted up on the Cross. Whoever believes in him, whoever sees in this Cross and in the Crucified One the Redeemer of the world, whoever looks with faith on the redemptive death of Jesus on the Cross, finds in him the power of eternal life. By this power, sin is overcome. People receive forgiveness of their sins at the price of the Sacrifice of Christ. They find again the life of God which had been lost by sin.

4. *This is the meaning of the Cross of Christ. This is its power.* “God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved” (Jo. 3, 17).

The feast that we celebrate today speaks of a marvellous and ceaseless action of God in human history, in the history of every man, woman and child. The Cross of Christ on Golgotha has become for all time the centre of this saving work of God. *Christ is the Saviour of the world*, because in him and through him the *love with which God so loved the world* is continuously revealed: “God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son” (*Ibid.* 3, 16).

– The Father *gave him* so that this Son, who is one in substance with him, would become man by being conceived of the Virgin Mary.

– The Father *gave him* so that as the Son of Man he would proclaim the Gospel, the Good News of salvation.

– The Father *gave him* so that this Son, by responding with his own infinite love to the love of the Father, might offer himself on the Cross.

5. From a human point of view, Christ's *offering of himself on the Cross was a sign of contradiction*, an unthinkable disgrace. It was, in fact, *the most profound humiliation possible*.

In today's liturgy, *the Apostle Paul* speaks to us in words that capture the mystery of the Cross of Christ: "His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a Cross. *But God raised him high*" (*Phil. 2, 6-9*).

Through his self-emptying on Golgotha, in the disgrace of the Cross and the crucifixion (at least in the human way of understanding these events) Christ receives the highest exaltation. In God's eyes, the Cross is the greatest triumph. The way of human judgement is very different from God's. God's judgement far surpasses ours. What seems to us to be failure is, in God's eyes, the victory of sacrificial love.

It is precisely this Cross of human disgrace that bears within itself the source of the exaltation of Christ in God.

"God raised him high and gave him the name which is above all other names so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld, should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and that every tongue should acclaim *Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father*" (*Ibid. 2, 9-11*).

To the eyes of the Apostles this was revealed through the Resurrection of Christ. At that moment they understood that Christ is the Lord, that he has been given all power in heaven and on earth. At that moment their eyes and their hearts were opened, so that the lips of Thomas could profess: "My Lord and My God"! (*Io. 20, 28*). And once they had come to believe, through the power of the Spirit of Truth, *they were ready to go forth into the whole world* to teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Cfr. *Matth. 28, 19*).

6. Yes, it is through the Cross that Christ is exalted. Today's feast of the Church speaks to us of this mystery. At the same time, it speaks of *Christ who by means of the Cross lifts up humanity, lifts up all humanity and indeed all creation*. "For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved" (*Io. 3, 17*).

Being "saved" means that every man and woman can be healed of the sin that poisoned the human family and all history. Jesus says to his Apostles after his Resurrection: "Those whose sins

you forgive, they are forgiven". And as he says it he shows them the wounds of his crucifixion, to let them know that it is precisely in the Cross that the power to forgive sins is hidden, the power to heal consciences and human hearts.

Generation after generation passes. And in the midst of this passing, the Cross of Christ remains. Through the Cross, God continuously proclaims to the world the infinite love which no created evil is able to overcome. Yes, the Cross remains, so that in it the world, indeed every human person, may find the way of salvation. *For it is by this Cross that the world is saved!*

7. By this one holy Cross *the people of Lesotho* are saved. For more than a hundred years, the message of the Cross has been proclaimed here in your land. The power of the Cross has been uplifting and enriching your culture, enhancing human dignity, overcoming sin and division, touching your own lives as it did the lives of your forebears, with the healing mercy of God.

The Cross of Christ has indeed triumphed among the Basotho people. The Christian faith has taken root and brought forth abundant fruit. And yet *evangelization must continue*. The Good News of Christ's Death and Resurrection must be constantly proclaimed anew, for the Church always needs to be built up in faith and charity. In a particular way, *marriage and family life* must be strengthened, first by preaching the real nature of Christian marriage, and then by working to overcome the false ideas and practices of society which damage human dignity and hinder the fidelity of husband and wife. This is especially urgent in a community which has to bear the strains and stresses of the absence of many fathers of families who are compelled by economic circumstances to seek employment outside the borders of Lesotho.

Educators and Catholic lay associations can make an invaluable contribution in the task of evangelization. Precisely as lay people, under the guidance of, and in collaboration with, the clergy and religious, they fulfil a vital role of handing on the Church's great patrimony of doctrinal and moral truths. They bear witness to the Gospel of Christ by serving the poor and working for justice. And given the special role of the Church in the field of education in this Kingdom, teachers have a unique opportunity of forming their pupils in the love and knowledge of Jesus Christ. That is why the University of Roma, which was founded by the Catholic Church, has been such a blessing in this country. May those of you who have attended this University and benefited from higher education always use this precious gift to serve your brothers and sisters and build up the Body of Christ.

8. The Church in Lesotho today meditates on this wondrous mystery of the Triumph of the Cross and *proclaims to all people in the words of the Psalmist*: "Give heed, my people, to my teaching; turn your ear to *the words of my mouth*" (Ps. 78 (77), 1).

And the greatest word that God has ever spoken to humanity through his only-begotten Son is the Cross, *the word of the Cross*. It was in this sign that the faith came to this land; it is a sign that one

meets along mountain roads and the deepest valleys.

People of Lesotho, my brothers and sisters in Christ: Let us never forget the Cross, the *triumphant* Cross.

Let us never forget the works of the Lord! (Cfr. *Ps. 78 (77), 7*). Amen.

Prayer before the tomb of Fr Joseph Gérard

God our Father,
all creation praises you,
all people delight in your presence.
You guide the course of history,
you govern all nations with order and mercy.

In your loving providence,
you called your servant, Joseph Gérard,
to imitate your only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
to follow him more closely in chastity, poverty and obedience,
and to proclaim the Good News of salvation
in South Africa and in the Kingdom of Lesotho.

O Father of tenderness and love,
at this tomb of Joseph Gérard, we recall with gratitude
how you blessed your servant with a faithful spirit of prayer
that he might constantly walk in your gentle presence
and pour out his life in generous service of others.

You filled him with wisdom and apostolic zeal
that he might enlighten minds with the truth of the Gospel.

You gave your chosen one the gift of compassion
that, he might offer comfort to the sick, hope to the dying,
and charity to all.

On this vigil of his beatification
we thank you, heavenly Father, Source of all holiness,
for the Gospel witness of Father Joseph Gérard.

By the help of his prayers

give us purity of heart,
strengthen us in faith,
keep us firm in hope,
inspire us to imitate his example of love.

Bless the Church in this land
with renewed vigour in serving you,
with fresh enthusiasm for evangelization,
so that always and in everything
your Name may be blessed and adored.

This we ask through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

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