



Homily for Holy Thursday
Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

From many a place and many a person, I have been told in these past few days: “you are preparing for a difficult Easter!”.

This clearly references the terrible months which we are living here in the Holy Land as we undergo the hard test of our trust, our hope, our living together in civil society and our ecclesial brotherly relations. These words are also a way of expressing understanding, engagement, and solidarity. Here, I thank everyone from my heart, beginning with the Holy Father, for supporting us in these months and I thank you who continue to support us with your prayers and active generosity.

Certainly, the war, with its burden of violence and hatred, suffering and death, makes celebrating this feast difficult. Yet, Easter is never truly easy, unless we reduce it to an ancient rite, a mere religious feast among others. If what we mean by feast is only a moment of rest, a moment of merriment which makes the grayness of daily life more bearable, then yes: undeniably, this year there is little or no room for lightheartedness and leisure, while there is plenty of room for sorrow and tears.

If instead Easter is the celebration of Christ’s passion and resurrection, if it makes the passage from death to life real for us here and now, then it is not only this Easter that is difficult, but it is Easter itself that is always difficult. It is a difficult feast, just as Christian life is difficult: “Christianity is not easy, but it is joyful”, as St Paul VI once said.

The painful circumstances of today make leisure difficult, on the other hand they paradoxically increase our awareness and help us to enter the Paschal Mystery. It is a difficult mystery, not so much because of the difficulty of the dogma, but because of our difficulty in welcoming it and living it.

Difficult describes first and foremost Jesus' Easter. In the most difficult night of His life, the night in which He was betrayed, it was not easy for Him to trust the Father, to keep His friends together, to look forward to the day when He would drink with His own the new wine of the Kingdom. It was not easy for Him, even in the burning desire of His heart, to eat that Passover with the disciples, who were busy with delusions of grandeur and with claiming the first place. It was difficult to make Peter understand that in some hours, which seem to require the sword, it is precisely the sword that is useless, because in the end, life will not come from overpowering others, but from serving them: "If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet" (Jn. 13:14). He went to the extreme of sweating blood as He endeavored to remain faithful to His Father who makes the sun rise on the good and the bad, Who loves the last as much as the first. Yes, the Paschal Mystery of Jesus was as difficult as love is when it is true, when it is fulfilled in the gift of total self-giving. Sin (the term which appears significantly for the first time in the Bible, precisely in connection with the fratricidal "war" between Cain and Abel) made love difficult, the way of truth hard, and the birth pangs of new life painful.

Ever has the Paschal Mystery been difficult for Christians because ever has Christian life in the style of the Paschal Mystery been difficult. It is difficult to be men and women of the Resurrection. In fact, to celebrate Christ's Easter, is to participate in it, to make it our own: *Christ is our Passover!* (1 Cor. 5,7). To rise with Him one must die with Him, and to die with Christ is never easy. As one great Catholic philosopher wrote, "Christ's death is far from being a passively suffered fate, or the deplorable accident that brings a biological structure to an end. His, is death that is accepted, it is a human life's perfect fulfillment, not the premature demise of a body. Christ's death is a death that bears fruit. It is the source of life that pierces through the firm and opaque wall of dissolution, to proclaim for every man the true *dies natalis*, the day of glory and resurrection" (Emanuele Samek Lodovici).

The circumstances in which we celebrate this Easter are not so different from those of the Lord's Passover. As then, so today, the desire for

peace is too often confused with the need for victory. As then, so today, the way of Barabbas seems more convincing than that of Jesus. Like the disciples on that supreme and dramatic night, we too are lost and confused. Sadness tempts us with an irenic slumber and with losing the courage of the *parrhesia*. Without this courage we are unable to allow ourselves to be wounded by another person's pain. Alternatively, like Peter, we too are tempted to take up the sword, to strike, and to be overpowered by feelings of violence and rejection, which only lead to death. Worse yet, we run the risk of betraying the Master by devaluing His message and prophecy by forsaking the grace of forgiveness and self-giving, which leads to true life. To the disciples as to us, the way of the Master appears much too difficult. But, He passes the worst night of His life with a greater love, giving Himself to the fullest. First, he offers Himself in the water poured on the disciples' feet, then, in the sign of the bread broken and the wine offered, and finally in the self-sacrifice on the Cross. The way of true life consists in going through the night by loving more, believing more, giving and forgiving without growing tired even during a state of conflict.

As Christians we should have the strength and courage to speak and act differently, I dare say in an alternative way, when faced with the world's dark night and pain, even if our words and actions may seem so difficult as to be incomprehensible. After all, the announcement of the Gospel is beautiful and good only to the ears of a heart converted to authentic truth and love.

"Do this in memory of me" (Lk 22:19). What we celebrate on the altar must be transformed into charity that is active in the world. The words and actions of the Upper Room, the words and actions of Easter, must become ours, so that we can bring light into darkness, reconciliation into conflict, comfort amidst the trial. Following the Master's example, we want and must rise from the Eucharistic table to bring to the world the same desire for good as the Master brought and continue to bring to the world the heavenly leaven of the Sacramental Bread.

All of this can never be the result of human effort alone. This alternative and truly revolutionary style, the style of love and of self-giving could never be ours based on our own strength. Christian life is not the toil of

Sisyphus, but the generous, willed, and grateful response of one who has experienced the joy of God's forgiveness. "What I am doing, you do not understand now, but you will understand later" (Jn. 13:7). Yes, it is difficult for us to enter this mystery, to allow ourselves to be convinced that it is not by power, force, or dominion that we can bring about the good of the world, but rather in meekness, service, giving, and washing of one another's feet. We can only understand this "afterwards" - after our feet have been washed by those who love us despite everything, after our betrayals have been freely forgiven - after our lives have been reborn from our encounter with the Risen One.

For this reason, today we are mystically back in the Upper Room to relive the Lord's last evening. We are here to once again learn from the Master Who asks us to act, or rather, to be like Him. We are here to renew our promise to be His ministers, that is, His trusted friends who, in spite of the fear of death, dare to take the leap of obedience to the Father and of service to our brothers and sisters, knowing that it is not a leap into the void but into God and His Word, which promises resurrection. We are here so that the mystical anointing of the Spirit may conform us to Him and to His choices and make us prophets of hope and witnesses of a new way of living and dying.

In spite of our fatigue and disorientation, we are here because we want to continue to be resurrected Christians and priests, who are capable of crossing the thousand nights of life and of the world. We dare to walk in our Master's footsteps, to share His intent. United with Him we wish to be capable of ever greater love, to give ourselves to the end, with trust and hope in the God who raises the dead.

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