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Christ's Death is the Christians's life, a Good Friday homily by St Josemaria (Text and Audio)

A homily given by St Josemaria on Good Friday, Lent of 1960, to help us reflect on and to re-live the last hours of Jesus' life.

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Christ's death is the Christians's life

A homily given on April 15, 1960

During this week which Christians traditionally call holy week, we are given another chance to reflect on and to re-live the last hours of Jesus' life. All the things brought to our mind by the different expressions of piety which characterize these days are of course directed to the resurrection, which is, as St Paul says, the basis of our faith. But we should not tread this path too hastily, lest we lose sight of a very simple fact which we might easily overlook. We will not be able to share in our Lord's resurrection unless we unite ourselves with him in his passion and death. If we are to accompany Christ in his glory at the end of Holy Week, we must first enter into his holocaust and be truly united to him, as he lies dead on Calvary.

Christ's generous self-sacrifice is a challenge to sin. We find it hard to accept the reality of sin, although its existence is undeniable. Sin is the *mysterium iniquitatis*: the mystery of evil, the inexplicable evil of the creature whose pride leads him to rise up against God. The story is as old as mankind. It began with the fall of our first parents; then came the unending depravities which punctuate the behaviour of mankind down the ages; and, finally, our own personal rebellions. It is very difficult to realize just how perverse sin is and to understand what our faith tells us. We should remember that even in the human context the scale of an offence is frequently determined by the importance of the injured party - his social standing, his qualities. But with sin man offends God, the creature repudiates his creator.

But "God is love." The abyss of malice which sin opens wide has been bridged by his infinite charity. God did not abandon men. His plans foresaw that the sacrifices of the old law would be insufficient to repair our faults and re-establish the unity which had been lost. A man who was God would have to offer himself up. To help us grasp in some measure this unfathomable mystery, we might imagine the Blessed Trinity taking counsel together in its uninterrupted intimate relationship of infinite love. As a result of its eternal decision, the only-begotten Son of God the Father takes on our human condition and bears the burden of our wretchedness and sorrows, to end up sewn with nails to a piece of wood.

Christ's whole life, from his birth in Bethlehem, was filled with a burning desire to carry out the saving decree of God the Father. Throughout the three years his disciples lived with

him, they constantly heard him say that his food was to do the will of him who sent him. And so it was, right up to the afternoon of the first Good Friday when his sacrifice was completed. "Bowing his head, he gave up his spirit." That is how St John the Apostle describes Christ's death. Jesus dies on the cross beneath the weight of all the faults of men, crushed by the sheer force and wickedness of our sins.

Let us meditate on our Lord, wounded from head to foot out of love for us. Using a phrase which approaches the truth, although it does not express its full reality, we can repeat the words of an ancient writer: "The body of Christ is a portrait in pain." At the sight of Christ bruised and broken - just a lifeless body taken down from the cross and given to his Mother - at the sight of Jesus destroyed in this way, we might have thought he had failed

utterly. Where are the crowds that once followed him, where is the kingdom he foretold? But this is victory, not defeat. We are nearer the resurrection than ever before; we are going to see the triumph which he has won with his obedience.

We have-just been re-living the drama of Calvary, which I would dare to describe as the first, the original Mass, celebrated by Jesus Christ. God the Father delivers his Son up to death. Jesus, the only Son of God, embraces the cross on which they have condemned him to die, and his sacrifice is accepted by his Father. As a result of that sacrifice, the Holy Spirit is poured out upon mankind.

The tragedy of the passion brings to fulfilment our own life and the whole of human history. We can't let Holy Week be just a kind of commemoration. It means

contemplating the mystery of Jesus Christ as something which continues to work in our souls. The Christian is obliged to be *alter Christus, ipse Christus*: another Christ, Christ himself. Through baptism all of us have been made priests of our lives, "to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Everything we do can be an expression of our obedience to God's will and so perpetuate the mission of the God-man.

Once we realize this, we are immediately reminded of our wretchedness and our personal failings. But they should not dishearten us; we should not become pessimistic and put our ideals aside. Our Lord is calling us, in our present state, to share his life and make an effort to be holy. I know holiness can sound like an empty word. Too many people think it is unattainable, something to do with ascetical

theology - but not a real goal for them, a living reality. The first Christians didn't think that way. They often used the word "saints" to describe each other in a very natural manner: "greetings to all the saints"; "my greetings to every one of the saints in Jesus Christ."

Take a look now at Calvary. Jesus has died and there is as yet no sign of his glorious triumph. It is a good time to examine how much we really want to live as Christians, to be holy. Here is our chance to react against our weaknesses with an act of faith. We can trust in God and resolve to put love into the things we do each day. The experience of sin should lead us to sorrow. We should make a more mature and deeper decision to be faithful and truly identify ourselves with Christ, persevering, no matter what it costs, in the priestly mission that he has given every single one of his disciples. That mission should

spur us on to be the salt and light of the world.

So, in thinking about Christ's death, we find ourselves invited to take a good hard look at our everyday activities and to be serious about the faith we profess. Holy Week cannot be a kind of "religious interlude"; time taken out from a life which is completely caught up in human affairs. It must be an opportunity to understand more profoundly the love of God, so that we'll be able to show that love to other people through what we do and say.

But for this our Lord lays down certain conditions. We cannot ignore his words that St Luke recorded for us: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." They are hard words. True, "hate" in English

does not exactly express what Jesus meant. Yet he did put it very strongly, because he doesn't just mean "love less," as some people interpret it in an attempt to tone down the sentence. The force behind these vigorous words does not lie in their implying a negative or pitiless attitude, for the Jesus who is speaking here is none other than that Jesus who commands us to love others as we love ourselves and who gives up his life for mankind. These words indicate simply that we cannot be half-hearted when it comes to loving God. Christ's words could be translated as "love more, love better," in the sense that a selfish or partial love is not enough - we have to love others with the love of God.

That's the key. Jesus says we must also hate our life, our very soul - that is what our Lord is asking of us. If we are superficial, if the only thing we care about is our own personal well-

being, if we try to make other people, and even the world, revolve around our own little self, we have no right to call ourselves Christians or think we are disciples of Christ. We have to give ourselves really, not just in word but in deed and truth. Love for God invites us to take up the cross and feel on our own shoulders the weight of humanity. It leads us to fulfil the clear and loving plans of the Father's will in all the circumstances of our work and life. In the passage we've just read Jesus goes on to say:

"Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple."

Let us accept God's will and be firmly resolved to build all our life in accordance with what our faith teaches and demands. We can be sure this involves struggle and suffering and pain, but if we really keep faith we will never feel we have lost God's favour. In the midst of

sorrow and even calumny, we will experience a happiness which moves us to love others, to help them share in our supernatural joy.

The Christian and human history

Being a Christian is not simply a way to personal contentment; it implies a mission. We have already recalled that God invites all Christians to be the salt and light of the world.

Echoing that commandment and using texts from the old testament, St Peter spells out its implications in forthright language: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."

Being a Christian is not something incidental; it is a divine reality that takes root deep in our life. It gives us a clear vision and strengthens our will to act as God wants. So we learn

that the Christian's pilgrimage in the world must express itself in a continuous service in all kinds of ways, varying with each person's circumstances, but always motivated by love of God and of our neighbour. Being a Christian means forgetting petty objectives of personal prestige and ambition and even possibly nobler aims, like philanthropy and compassion for the misfortunes of others. It means setting our mind and heart on reaching the fullness of love which Jesus Christ showed by dying for us.

Let me give you an example of the kind of attitude which develops if one is unable to penetrate this mystery of Jesus. Some people tend to see Christianity as a collection of devout practices, failing to realize the relation between them and the circumstances of ordinary life, including the urgency to meet the needs of other people and remedy

injustice. I would say that anyone who has that attitude has not yet understood the meaning of the incarnation. The Son of God has taken the body and soul and voice of a man; he has shared our fate, even to the extent of experiencing the excruciating anguish of death. Yet perhaps without wanting to, some people regard Christ as a stranger in the world of man.

Others tend to imagine that in order to remain human we need to play down some central aspects of christian dogma. They act as if the life of prayer, continual relationship with God, implied fleeing from responsibilities and forsaking the world. But they forget that it was none other than Jesus who showed us the extreme to which we should go in love and service. Only if we try to understand the mystery of God's love - a love which went as far as death - will we be able to give

ourselves totally to others and not let ourselves be overcome by difficulties or indifference.

What illuminates our conscience is faith in Christ, who has died and risen and is present in every moment of life. Faith moves us to play our full part in the changing situations and in the problems of human history. In this history, which began with the creation of the world and will reach its fulfilment at the end of time, the Christian is no expatriate. He is a citizen of the city of men, and his soul longs for God. While still on earth he has glimpses of God's love and comes to recognize it as the goal to which all men on earth are called.

If my own personal experience is of any help, I can say that I have always seen my work as a priest and shepherd of souls as being aimed at helping each person to face up to all the demands of his life and to

discover what God wants from him in particular - without in any way limiting that holy independence and blessed personal responsibility which are the features of a christian conscience. This way of acting and this spirit are based on respect for the transcendence of revealed truth and on love for the freedom of the human person. I might add that they are also based on a realization that history is undetermined and open to a variety of human options - all of which God respects.

Following Christ does not mean taking refuge in the temple, shrugging one's shoulders at social development, ignoring the achievements and aberrations alike of men or nations. On the contrary, christian faith makes us see the world as God's creation and appreciate all its nobility and beauty, recognizing the dignity of each person made in the image of God. It

makes us admire the splendid gift of freedom which gives us power over our own actions and enables us - with heaven's grace - to build our eternal destiny. You would belittle the faith if you reduced it to a human ideology, if you raised a political-religious standard to condemn - on who knows what divine authority - those who think differently from you in matters which by their very nature can be solved in a wide variety of ways.

Understanding Christ's death

The only purpose of the digression I have just made was to emphasise a central truth: I wanted to remind you that christian life finds its meaning in God. Men have not been created just to build the best possible world. We have been put here on earth for a further purpose: to enter into communion with God himself. Jesus has promised us not a life of ease or

worldly achievement, but the house of his Father God, which awaits us at the end of the way.

The liturgy of Good Friday contains a wonderful hymn, *Crux fidelis*. It invites us to sing and celebrate the glorious struggle of our Lord, the victory of the cross, the splendid triumph of Christ. The redeemer of the universe is sacrificed and triumphs. God, the Lord of all creation, does not make his presence felt by force of arms or by the temporal power of his followers, but by the nobility of his infinite love.

The Lord does not destroy man's freedom; it is precisely he who has made us free. That is why he does not want to wring obedience from us. He wants our decisions to come from the depths of our heart. And he wants Christians to live in such a way that the people we deal with will find in our conduct - despite our

weaknesses, faults and failings - an echo of the drama of love that was Calvary. Everything we have comes from God; he wants us to be salt which flavours and light which brings the happy news that he is a Father who loves without measure. The Christian is the salt and light of the world, not because he conquers or triumphs, but because he bears witness to God's love. And he won't be salt if he can't give flavour. Nor will he be light if he doesn't bear witness to Jesus through his example and word, if he loses sight of the purpose of his life.

It is good for us to try to understand better the meaning of Christ's death. We must get beyond external appearances and cliches. We need to put ourselves really and truly into the scenes which we are re-living during these days: Jesus' sorrow, his Mother's tears, the disciples' flight, the courage of the holy women, the

daring of Joseph and Nicodemus who ask Pilate for the body of our Lord.

Let us, above all, come close to Jesus in his death and to his cross which stands out in silhouette above the summit of Golgotha. But we must approach him sincerely and with the interior recollection that is a sign of christian maturity. The divine and human events of the passion will then pierce our soul as words spoken to us by God to uncover the secrets of our heart and show us what he expects of our lives.

Many years ago I saw a painting which made a deep impression on me. It showed the cross of Christ with three angels beside it. One was weeping disconsolately ; one held a nail in his hand, as if trying to convince himself it was true; and the third was rapt in prayer. Here we have a program for each of us: to cry, believe and pray.

Here before the cross, we should have sorrow for our sins and for those of all men, for they are responsible for Jesus' death. We should have faith to penetrate deep into this sublime truth which surpasses our understanding and to fill ourselves with amazement at God's love. And we should pray so that Christ's life and death may become the model and motivation for our own life and self-giving. Only thus will we earn the name of conquerors: for the risen Christ will conquer in us, and death will be changed into life.
