

Easter Triduum with a selection of homilies by Pope Benedict XVI

The Easter Triduum is the beating heart of the liturgical year, the time when the Church contemplates the mystery of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Lord. To experience these holy days more deeply, I offer here a selection of homilies by Pope Benedict XVI chosen for the Easter Triduum.

1. Chrism Mass: To stand and minister in the name of the Lord

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Every year the Chrism Mass exhorts us to enter into that "yes" to God's call, which we pronounced on the day of our priestly ordination. "*Adsum* - here I am!", we have said like Isaiah, when he heard God's voice asking: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" "Here am I! Send me", Isaiah responded (Is 6: 8). Then the Lord himself, through the hands of the Bishop, placed his hands on us and we gave ourselves to his mission. Subsequently, we have followed many ways in the range of his call. Can we always affirm what Paul wrote to the Corinthians after years of Gospel service, often marked by fatigue and suffering of every type: "Our zeal has not slackened in this ministry which has been entrusted to us by God's mercy" (cf. II Cor 4: 1)? "Our zeal has not slackened". Let us pray on this day that it may always be kindled anew, that it may be ever nourished by the living flame of the Gospel.

At the same time Holy Thursday is an occasion for us to ask ourselves over and over again: to what did we say our "yes"? What does this "being a priest of Jesus Christ" mean? The Second Canon of our Missal, which was probably compiled in Rome already at the end of the second century, describes the essence of the priestly ministry with the words with which, in the *Book of Deuteronomy* (18: 5, 7), the essence of the Old Testament priesthood is described: *astare coram te et tibi ministrare* ["to stand and minister in the name of the Lord"]. There are therefore two duties that define the essence of the priestly ministry: in the first place, "to stand in his [the Lord's] presence". In the *Book of Deuteronomy* this is read in the context of the preceding disposition, according to which priests do not receive any portion of land in the Holy Land - they live of God and for God. They did not attend to the usual work necessary to sustain daily life. Their profession was to "stand in the Lord's presence" - to look to him, to be there for him. Hence, ultimately, the word indicated a life in God's presence, and with this also a ministry of representing others. As the others cultivated the land, from which the priest also lived, so he kept the world open to God, he had to live with his gaze on him.

Now if this word is found in the Canon of the Mass immediately after the consecration of the gifts, after the entrance of the Lord in the assembly of prayer, then for us this points to being before the Lord present, that is, it indicates the Eucharist as the centre of priestly life. But here too, the meaning is deeper. During Lent the hymn that introduces the Office of Readings of the Liturgy of the Hours - the Office that monks once recited during the night vigil before God and for humanity - one of the duties of Lent is described with the imperative: *arctius perstemus in custodia* - we must be even more intensely alert. In the tradition of Syrian monasticism, monks were qualified as "those who remained standing". This standing was an expression of vigilance. What was considered here as a duty of the monks, we can rightly see also as an expression of the priestly mission and as a correct interpretation of the word of Deuteronomy: the priest must be on the watch. He must be on his guard in the face of the imminent powers of evil.

He must keep the world awake for God. He must be the one who remains standing: upright before the trends of time. Upright in truth. Upright in the commitment for good. Being before the Lord must always also include, at its depths, responsibility for humanity to the Lord, who in his turn takes on the burden of all of us to the Father. And it must be a taking on of him, of Christ, of his word, his truth, his love. The priest must be upright, fearless and prepared to sustain even offences for the Lord, as referred to in the *Acts of the Apostles*: they were "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name" (5: 41) of Jesus.

Now let us move on to the second word that the Second Canon repeats from the Old Testament text - "to stand in your presence and serve you". The priest must be an upright person, vigilant, a person who remains standing. Service is then added to all this. In the Old Testament text this word has an essentially ritualistic meaning: all acts of worship foreseen by the Law are the priests' duty. But this action, according to the rite, was classified as service, as a duty of service, and thus it explains in what spirit this activity must take place. With the assumption of the word "serve" in the Canon, the liturgical meaning of this term was adopted in a certain way - to conform with the novelty of the Christian cult. What the priest does at that moment, in the Eucharistic celebration, is to serve, to fulfil a service to God and a service to humanity. The cult that Christ rendered to the Father was the giving of himself to the end for humanity. Into this cult, this service, the priest must insert himself.

Thus, the word "serve" contains many dimensions. In the first place, part of it is certainly the correct celebration of the liturgy and of the sacraments in general, accomplished through interior participation. We must learn to increasingly understand the sacred liturgy in all its essence, to develop a living familiarity with it, so that it becomes the soul of our daily life. It is then that we celebrate in the correct way; it is then that the *ars celebrandi*, the art of celebrating, emerges by itself. In this art there must be nothing artificial. If the liturgy is the central duty of the priest, this also means that prayer must be a primary reality, to be learned ever anew and ever more deeply at the school of Christ and of the Saints of all the ages. Since the Christian liturgy by its nature is also always a proclamation, we must be people who are familiar with the Word of God, love it and live by it: only then can we explain it in an adequate way. "To serve the Lord" - priestly service precisely also means to learn to know the Lord in his Word and to make it known to all those he entrusts to us.

Lastly, two other aspects are part of service. No one is closer to his master than the servant who has access to the most private dimensions of his life. In this sense "to serve" means closeness, it requires familiarity. This familiarity also bears a danger: when we continually encounter the sacred it risks becoming habitual for us. In this way, reverential fear is extinguished. Conditioned by all our habits we no longer perceive the great, new and surprising fact that he himself is present, speaks to us, gives himself to us. We must ceaselessly struggle against this becoming accustomed to the extraordinary reality, against the indifference of the heart, always recognizing our insufficiency anew and the grace that there is in the fact that he consigned himself into our hands.

To serve means to draw near, but above all it also means obedience. The servant is under the word: "not my will, but thine, be done" (Lk 22: 42). With this word Jesus, in the Garden of Olives, has resolved the decisive battle against sin, against the rebellion of the sinful heart. Adam's sin consisted precisely in the fact that he wanted to accomplish his own will and not God's. Humanity's temptation is always to want to be totally autonomous, to follow its own will alone and to maintain that only in this way will we be free; that only thanks to a similarly unlimited freedom would man be completely man. But this is precisely how we pit ourselves against the truth. Because the truth is that we must share our freedom with others and we can be free only in communion with them. This shared freedom can be true freedom only if we enter into what constitutes the very measure of freedom, if we enter into God's will.

This fundamental obedience that is part of the human being - a person cannot be merely for and by himself - becomes still more concrete in the priest: we do not preach ourselves, but him and his Word, which we could not have invented ourselves. We proclaim the Word of Christ in the correct way only in communion with his Body. Our obedience is a believing with the Church, a thinking and speaking with the Church, serving through her. What Jesus predicted to Peter also always applies: "You will be taken where you do not want to go". This letting oneself be guided where one does not want to be led is an essential dimension of our service, and it is exactly what makes us free. In this being guided, which can be contrary to our ideas and plans, we experience something new - the wealth of God's love.

"To stand in his presence and serve him": Jesus Christ as the true High Priest of the world has conferred to these words a previously unimaginable depth. He, who as Son was and is the Lord, has willed to become that Servant of God which the vision of the *Book of the Prophet Isaiah* had foreseen. He has willed to be

the Servant of all. He has portrayed the whole of his high priesthood in the gesture of the washing of the feet. With the gesture of love to the end he washes our dirty feet, with the humility of his service he purifies us from the illness of our pride. Thus, he makes us able to become partakers of God's banquet. He has descended, and the true ascent of man is now accomplished in our descending with him and toward him. His elevation is the Cross. It is the deepest descent and, as love pushed to the end, it is at the same time the culmination of the ascent, the true "elevation" of humanity. "To stand in his presence and serve him": this now means to enter into his call to serve God. The Eucharist as the presence of the descent and ascent of Christ thus always recalls, beyond itself, the many ways of service through love of neighbour. Let us ask the Lord on this day for the gift to be able to say again in this sense our "yes" to his call: "Here am I! Send me" (Is 6: 8). Amen.

Holy Thursday, 20 March 2008

2. Holy Thursday: "Hoc est hodie"

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Qui, pridie quam pro nostra omniumque salute pateretur, hoc est hodie, accepit panem: these words we shall pray today in the Canon of the Mass. "*Hoc est hodie*" – the Liturgy of Holy Thursday places the word "today" into the text of the prayer, thereby emphasizing the particular dignity of this day. It was "today" that He did this: he gave himself to us for ever in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood. This "today" is first and foremost the memorial of that first Paschal event. Yet it is something more. With the Canon, we enter into this "today". Our today comes into contact with his today. He does this now. With the word "today", the Church's Liturgy wants us to give great inner attention to the mystery of this day, to the words in which it is expressed. We therefore seek to listen in a new way to the institution narrative, in the form in which the Church has formulated it, on the basis of Scripture and in contemplation of the Lord himself.

The first thing to strike us is that the institution narrative is not an independent phrase, but it starts with a relative pronoun: *qui pridie*. This "*qui*" connects the entire narrative to the preceding section of the prayer, "let it become for us the body and blood of Jesus Christ, your only Son, our Lord." In this way, the institution narrative is linked to the preceding prayer, to the entire Canon, and it too becomes a prayer. By no means is it merely an interpolated narrative, nor is it a case of an authoritative self-standing text that actually interrupts the prayer. It is a prayer. And only in the course of the prayer is the priestly act of consecration accomplished, which becomes transformation, transubstantiation of our gifts of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ.

As she prays at this central moment, the Church is fully in tune with the event that took place in the Upper Room, when Jesus' action is described in the words: "*gratias agens benedixit* – he gave you thanks and praise". In this expression, the Roman liturgy has made two words out of the one Hebrew word *berakha*, which is rendered in Greek with the two terms *eucharistia* and *eulogia*. The Lord gives thanks. When we thank, we acknowledge that a certain thing is a gift that has come from another. The Lord gives thanks, and in so doing gives back to God the bread, "fruit of the earth and work of human hands", so as to receive it anew from him. Thanksgiving becomes blessing. The offering that we have placed in God's hands returns from him blessed and transformed. The Roman liturgy rightly interprets, therefore, our praying at this sacred moment by means of the words: "through him, we ask you to accept and bless these gifts we offer you in sacrifice". All this lies hidden within the word "*eucharistia*".

There is another aspect of the institution narrative cited in the Roman Canon on which we should reflect this evening. The praying Church gazes upon the hands and eyes of the Lord. It is as if she wants to observe him, to perceive the form of his praying and acting in that remarkable hour, she wants to encounter the figure of Jesus even, as it were, through the senses. "He took bread in his sacred hands ..." Let us look at those hands with which he healed men and women; the hands with

which he blessed babies; the hands that he laid upon men; the hands that were nailed to the Cross and that forever bear the stigmata as signs of his readiness to die for love. Now we are commissioned to do what he did: to take bread in our hands so that through the Eucharistic Prayer it will be transformed. At our priestly ordination, our hands were anointed, so that they could become hands of blessing. Let us pray to the Lord at this hour that our hands will serve more and more to bring salvation, to bring blessing, to make his goodness present!

From the introduction to the Priestly Prayer of Jesus (cf. *Jn* 17:1), the Canon takes these words: “Looking up to heaven, to you his almighty Father ...” The Lord teaches us to raise our eyes, and especially our hearts. He teaches us to fix our gaze upwards, detaching it from the things of this world, to direct ourselves in prayer towards God and thus to raise ourselves. In a hymn from the Liturgy of the Hours, we ask the Lord to guard our eyes, so that they do not take in or cause to enter within us “*vanitates*” – vanities, nothings, that which is merely appearance. Let us pray that no evil will enter through our eyes, falsifying and tainting our very being. But we want to pray above all for eyes that see whatever is true, radiant and good; so that they become capable of seeing God’s presence in the world. Let us pray that we will look upon the world with eyes of love, with the eyes of Jesus, recognizing our brothers and sisters who need our help, who are awaiting our word and our action.

Having given thanks and praise, the Lord then breaks the bread and gives it to the disciples. Breaking the bread is the act of the father of the family who looks after his children and gives them what they need for life. But it is also the act of hospitality with which the stranger, the guest, is received within the family and is given a share in its life. Dividing (*dividere*), sharing (*condividere*) brings about unity. Through sharing, communion is created. In the broken bread, the Lord distributes himself. The gesture of breaking also alludes mysteriously to his death, to the love that extends even to death. He distributes himself, the true “bread for the life of the world” (cf. *Jn* 6:51). The nourishment that man needs in his deepest self is communion with God himself. Giving thanks and praise, Jesus transforms the bread, he no longer gives earthly bread, but communion with himself. This transformation, though, seeks to be the start of the transformation of the world – into a world of resurrection, a world of God. Yes, it is about transformation – of the new man and the new world that find their origin in the bread that is consecrated, transformed, transubstantiated.

We said that breaking the bread is an act of communion, an act of uniting through sharing. Thus, in the act itself, the intimate nature of the Eucharist is already indicated: it is *agape*, it is love made corporeal. In the word “*agape*”, the meanings of Eucharist and love intertwine. In Jesus’ act of breaking the bread, the love that is shared has attained its most radical form: Jesus allows himself to be broken as living bread. In the bread that is distributed, we recognize the mystery of the grain of wheat that dies, and so bears fruit. We recognize the new multiplication of the loaves, which derives from the dying of the grain of wheat and will continue until the end of the world. At the same time, we see that the Eucharist can never be just a liturgical action. It is complete only if the liturgical *agape* then becomes love in daily life. In Christian worship, the two things become one – experiencing the Lord’s love in the act of worship and fostering love for one’s neighbour. At this hour, we ask the Lord for the grace to learn to live the mystery of the Eucharist ever more deeply, in such a way that the transformation of the world can begin to take place.

After the bread, Jesus takes the chalice of wine. The Roman Canon describes the chalice which the Lord gives to his disciples as “*praeclarus calix*” (the glorious cup), thereby alluding to Psalm 23 [22], the Psalm which speaks of God as the Good Shepherd, the strong Shepherd. There we read these words: “You have prepared a banquet for me in the sight of my foes ... My cup is overflowing” – *calix praeclarus*. The Roman Canon interprets this passage from the Psalm as a prophecy that is fulfilled in the Eucharist: yes, the Lord does indeed prepare a banquet for us in the midst of the threats of this world, and he gives us the glorious chalice – the chalice of great joy, of the true feast, for which we all long – the chalice filled with the wine of his love. The chalice signifies the wedding-feast: now the “hour” has come to which the wedding-feast of Cana had mysteriously alluded. Yes indeed, the

Eucharist is more than a meal, it is a wedding-feast. And this wedding is rooted in God's gift of himself even to death. In the words of Jesus at the Last Supper and in the Church's Canon, the solemn mystery of the wedding is concealed under the expression "*novum Testamentum*". This chalice is the new Testament – "the new Covenant in my blood", as Saint Paul presents the words of Jesus over the chalice in today's second reading (*1 Cor 11:25*). The Roman Canon adds: "of the new and everlasting covenant", in order to express the indissolubility of God's nuptial bond with humanity. The reason why older translations of the Bible do not say Covenant, but Testament, lies in the fact that this is no mere contract between two parties on the same level, but it brings into play the infinite distance between God and man. What we call the new and the ancient Covenant is not an agreement between two equal parties, but simply the gift of God who bequeaths to us his love – himself. Certainly, through this gift of his love, he transcends all distance and makes us truly his "partners" – the nuptial mystery of love is accomplished.

In order to understand profoundly what is taking place here, we must pay even greater attention to the words of the Bible and their original meaning. Scholars tell us that in those ancient times of which the histories of Israel's forefathers speak, to "ratify a Covenant" means "to enter with others into a bond based on blood or to welcome the other into one's own covenant fellowship and thus to enter into a communion of mutual rights and obligations". In this way, a real, if non-material form of consanguinity is established. The partners become in some way "brothers of the same flesh and the same bones". The covenant brings about a fellowship that means peace (cf. *ThWNT* II, 105-137). Can we now form at least an idea of what happened at the hour of the Last Supper, and what has been renewed ever since, whenever we celebrate the Eucharist? God, the living God, establishes a communion of peace with us, or to put it more strongly, he creates "consanguinity" between himself and us. Through the incarnation of Jesus, through the outpouring of his blood, we have been drawn into an utterly real consanguinity with Jesus and thus with God himself. The blood of Jesus is his love, in which divine life and human life have become one. Let us pray to the Lord, that we may come to understand ever more deeply the greatness of this mystery. Let us pray that in our innermost selves its transforming power will increase, so that we truly acquire consanguinity with Jesus, so that we are filled with his peace and grow in communion with one another.

Now, however, a further question arises. In the Upper Room, Christ gives his Body and Blood to the disciples, that is, he gives himself in the totality of his person. But can he do so? He is still physically present in their midst, he is standing in front of them! The answer is: at that hour, Jesus fulfils what he had previously proclaimed in the Good Shepherd discourse: "No one takes my life from me: I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it again ..." (*Jn 10:18*). No one can take his life from him: he lays it down by his own free decision. At that hour, he anticipates the crucifixion and resurrection. What is later to be fulfilled, as it were, physically in him, he already accomplishes in anticipation, in the freedom of his love. He gives his life and he takes it again in the resurrection, so as to be able to share it for ever.

Lord, today you give us your life, you give us yourself. Enter deeply within us with your love. Make us live in your "today". Make us instruments of your peace! Amen.

Holy Thursday, 9 April 2009

3. Paschal Vigil: Resurrexi et adhuc tecum sum

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

From ancient times the liturgy of Easter day has begun with the words: *Resurrexi et adhuc tecum sum* – I arose, and am still with you; you have set your hand upon me. The liturgy sees these as the first words spoken by the Son to the Father after his resurrection, after his return from the night of death into the world of the living. The hand of the Father upheld him even on that night, and thus he could rise again.

These words are taken from Psalm 138, where originally they had a different meaning. That Psalm is a song of wonder at God's omnipotence and omnipresence, a hymn of trust in the God who never allows us to fall from his hands. And his hands are good hands. The Psalmist imagines himself journeying to the farthest reaches of the cosmos – and what happens to him? “If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, ‘Let only darkness cover me’ . . . , even the darkness is not dark to you. . . ; for darkness is as light with you” (*Ps* 138[139]:8-12).

On Easter day the Church tells us that Jesus Christ made that journey to the ends of the universe for our sake. In the *Letter to the Ephesians* we read that he descended to the depths of the earth, and that the one who descended is also the one who has risen far above the heavens, that he might fill all things (cf. 4:9ff.). The vision of the Psalm thus became reality. In the impenetrable gloom of death Christ came like light – the night became as bright as day and the darkness became as light. And so the Church can rightly consider these words of thanksgiving and trust as words spoken by the Risen Lord to his Father: “Yes, I have journeyed to the uttermost depths of the earth, to the abyss of death, and brought them light; now I have risen and I am upheld for ever by your hands.” But these words of the Risen Christ to the Father have also become words which the Lord speaks to us: “I arose and now I am still with you,” he says to each of us. My hand upholds you. Wherever you may fall, you will always fall into my hands. I am present even at the door of death. Where no one can accompany you further, and where you can bring nothing, even there I am waiting for you, and for you I will change darkness into light.

These words of the Psalm, read as a dialogue between the Risen Christ and ourselves, also explain what takes place at Baptism. Baptism is more than a bath, a purification. It is more than becoming part of a community. It is a new birth. A new beginning in life. The passage of the *Letter to the Romans* which we have just read says, in words filled with mystery, that in Baptism we have been “grafted” onto Christ by likeness to his death. In Baptism we give ourselves over to Christ – he takes us unto himself, so that we no longer live for ourselves, but through him, with him and in him; so that we live with him and thus for others. In Baptism we surrender ourselves, we place our lives in his hands, and so we can say with Saint Paul, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” If we offer ourselves in this way, if we accept, as it were, the death of our very selves, this means that the frontier between death and life is no longer absolute. On either side of death we are with Christ and so, from that moment forward, death is no longer a real boundary. Paul tells us this very clearly in his *Letter to the Philippians*: “For me to live is Christ. To be with him (by dying) is gain. Yet if I remain in this life, I can still labour fruitfully. And so I am hard pressed between these two things. To depart – by being executed – and to be with Christ; that is far better. But to remain in this life is more necessary on your account” (cf. 1:21ff.). On both sides of the frontier of death, Paul is with Christ – there is no longer a real difference. Yes, it is true: “Behind and before you besiege me, your hand ever laid upon me” (*Ps* 138 [139]: 5). To the Romans Paul wrote: “No one . . . lives to himself and no one dies to himself. . . Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's” (*Rom* 14:7ff.).

Dear candidates for Baptism, this is what is new about Baptism: our life now belongs to Christ, and no longer to ourselves. As a result we are never alone, even in death, but are always with the One who lives for ever. In Baptism, in the company of Christ, we have already made that cosmic journey to the very abyss of death. At his side and, indeed, drawn up in his love, we are freed from fear. He enfolds us and carries us wherever we may go – he who is Life itself.

Let us return once more to the night of Holy Saturday. In the Creed we say about Christ's journey that he “descended into hell.” What happened then? Since we have no knowledge of the world of death, we can only imagine his triumph over death with the help of images which remain very inadequate. Yet, inadequate as they are, they can help us to understand something of the mystery. The liturgy applies to Jesus' descent into the night of death the words of *Psalm* 23[24]: “Lift up your heads, O

gates; be lifted up, O ancient doors!” The gates of death are closed, no one can return from there. There is no key for those iron doors. But Christ has the key. His Cross opens wide the gates of death, the stern doors. They are barred no longer. His Cross, his radical love, is the key that opens them. The love of the One who, though God, became man in order to die – this love has the power to open those doors. This love is stronger than death. The Easter icons of the Oriental Church show how Christ enters the world of the dead. He is clothed with light, for God is light. “The night is bright as the day, the darkness is as light” (cf. *Ps* 138[139]12). Entering the world of the dead, Jesus bears the stigmata, the signs of his passion: his wounds, his suffering, have become power: they are love that conquers death. He meets Adam and all the men and women waiting in the night of death. As we look at them, we can hear an echo of the prayer of Jonah: “Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice” (*Jn* 2:2). In the incarnation, the Son of God became one with human beings – with Adam. But only at this moment, when he accomplishes the supreme act of love by descending into the night of death, does he bring the journey of the incarnation to its completion. By his death he now clasps the hand of Adam, of every man and woman who awaits him, and brings them to the light.

But we may ask: what is the meaning of all this imagery? What was truly new in what happened on account of Christ? The human soul was created immortal – what exactly did Christ bring that was new? The soul is indeed immortal, because man in a unique way remains in God’s memory and love, even after his fall. But his own powers are insufficient to lift him up to God. We lack the wings needed to carry us to those heights. And yet, nothing else can satisfy man eternally, except being with God. An eternity without this union with God would be a punishment. Man cannot attain those heights on his own, yet he yearns for them. “Out of the depths I cry to you...” Only the Risen Christ can bring us to complete union with God, to the place where our own powers are unable to bring us. Truly Christ puts the lost sheep upon his shoulders and carries it home. Clinging to his Body we have life, and in communion with his Body we reach the very heart of God. Only thus is death conquered, we are set free and our life is hope.

This is the joy of the Easter Vigil: we are free. In the resurrection of Jesus, love has been shown to be stronger than death, stronger than evil. Love made Christ descend, and love is also the power by which he ascends. The power by which he brings us with him. In union with his love, borne aloft on the wings of love, as persons of love, let us descend with him into the world’s darkness, knowing that in this way we will also rise up with him. On this night, then, let us pray: Lord, show us that love is stronger than hatred, that love is stronger than death. Descend into the darkness and the abyss of our modern age, and take by the hand those who await you. Bring them to the light! In my own dark nights, be with me to bring me forth! Help me, help all of us, to descend with you into the darkness of all those people who are still waiting for you, who out of the depths cry unto you! Help us to bring them your light! Help us to say the “yes” of love, the love that makes us descend with you and, in so doing, also to rise with you. Amen!

Holy Saturday, 7 April 2007

4. Easter Vigil: The oil of mercy

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

An ancient Jewish legend from the apocryphal book “The life of Adam and Eve” recounts that, in his final illness, Adam sent his son Seth together with Eve into the region of Paradise to fetch the oil of mercy, so that he could be anointed with it and healed. The two of them went in search of the tree of life, and after much praying and weeping on their part, the Archangel Michael appeared to them, and told them they would not obtain the oil of the tree of mercy and that Adam would have to die. Later, Christian readers added a word of consolation to the Archangel’s message, to the effect that after 5,500 years the loving King, Christ, would come, the Son of God who would anoint all those who believe in him with the oil of his mercy. “The oil of mercy from eternity to eternity will be given to

those who are reborn of water and the Holy Spirit. Then the Son of God, Christ, abounding in love, will descend into the depths of the earth and will lead your father into Paradise, to the tree of mercy.” This legend lays bare the whole of humanity’s anguish at the destiny of illness, pain and death that has been imposed upon us. Man’s resistance to death becomes evident: somewhere – people have constantly thought – there must be some cure for death. Sooner or later it should be possible to find the remedy not only for this or that illness, but for our ultimate destiny – for death itself. Surely the medicine of immortality must exist.

Today too, the search for a source of healing continues. Modern medical science strives, if not exactly to exclude death, at least to eliminate as many as possible of its causes, to postpone it further and further, to prolong life more and more. But let us reflect for a moment: what would it really be like if we were to succeed, perhaps not in excluding death totally, but in postponing it indefinitely, in reaching an age of several hundred years? Would that be a good thing? Humanity would become extraordinarily old, there would be no more room for youth. Capacity for innovation would die, and endless life would be no paradise, if anything a condemnation. The true cure for death must be different. It cannot lead simply to an indefinite prolongation of this current life. It would have to transform our lives from within. It would need to create a new life within us, truly fit for eternity: it would need to transform us in such a way as not to come to an end with death, but only then to begin in fullness. What is new and exciting in the Christian message, in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, was and is that we are told: yes indeed, this cure for death, this true medicine of immortality, does exist. It has been found. It is within our reach. In baptism, this medicine is given to us. A new life begins in us, a life that matures in faith and is not extinguished by the death of the old life, but is only then fully revealed.

To this some, perhaps many, will respond: I certainly hear the message, but I lack faith. And even those who want to believe will ask: but is it really so? How are we to picture it to ourselves? How does this transformation of the old life come about, so as to give birth to the new life that knows no death? Once again, an ancient Jewish text can help us form an idea of the mysterious process that begins in us at baptism. There it is recounted how the patriarch Enoch was taken up to the throne of God. But he was filled with fear in the presence of the glorious angelic powers, and in his human weakness he could not contemplate the face of God. “Then God said to Michael,” to quote from the book of Enoch, “‘Take Enoch and remove his earthly clothing. Anoint him with sweet oil and vest him in the robes of glory!’ And Michael took off my garments, anointed me with sweet oil, and this oil was more than a radiant light ... its splendour was like the rays of the sun. When I looked at myself, I saw that I was like one of the glorious beings” (Ph. Rech, *Inbild des Kosmos*, II 524).

Precisely this – being reclothed in the new garment of God – is what happens in baptism, so the Christian faith tells us. To be sure, this changing of garments is something that continues for the whole of life. What happens in baptism is the beginning of a process that embraces the whole of our life – it makes us fit for eternity, in such a way that, robed in the garment of light of Jesus Christ, we can appear before the face of God and live with him for ever.

In the rite of baptism there are two elements in which this event is expressed and made visible in a way that demands commitment for the rest of our lives. There is first of all the rite of renunciation and the promises. In the early Church, the one to be baptized turned towards the west, the symbol of darkness, sunset, death and hence the dominion of sin. The one to be baptized turned in that direction and pronounced a threefold “no”: to the devil, to his pomp and to sin. The strange word “pomp”, that is to say the devil’s glamour, referred to the splendour of the ancient cult of the gods and of the ancient theatre, in which it was considered entertaining to watch people being torn limb from limb by wild beasts. What was being renounced by this “no” was a type of culture that ensnared man in the adoration of power, in the world of greed, in lies, in cruelty. It was an act of liberation from the imposition of a form of life that was presented as pleasure and yet hastened the destruction of all that was best in man. This renunciation – albeit in less dramatic form – remains an essential part of baptism today. We remove the “old garments”, which we cannot wear in God’s presence. Or better

put: we begin to remove them. This renunciation is actually a promise in which we hold out our hand to Christ, so that he may guide us and reclothe us. What these “garments” are that we take off, what the promise is that we make, becomes clear when we see in the fifth chapter of the Letter to the Galatians what Paul calls “works of the flesh” – a term that refers precisely to the old garments that we remove. Paul designates them thus: “fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing and the like” (Gal5:19ff.). These are the garments that we remove: the garments of death.

Then, in the practice of the early Church, the one to be baptized turned towards the east – the symbol of light, the symbol of the newly rising sun of history, the symbol of Christ. The candidate for baptism determines the new direction of his life: faith in the Trinitarian God to whom he entrusts himself. Thus it is God who clothes us in the garment of light, the garment of life. Paul calls these new “garments” “fruits of the spirit”, and he describes them as follows: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22).

In the early Church, the candidate for baptism was then truly stripped of his garments. He descended into the baptismal font and was immersed three times – a symbol of death that expresses all the radicality of this removal and change of garments. His former death-bound life the candidate consigns to death with Christ, and he lets himself be drawn up by and with Christ into the new life that transforms him for eternity. Then, emerging from the waters of baptism the neophytes were clothed in the white garment, the garment of God’s light, and they received the lighted candle as a sign of the new life in the light that God himself had lit within them. They knew that they had received the medicine of immortality, which was fully realized at the moment of receiving holy communion. In this sacrament we receive the body of the risen Lord and we ourselves are drawn into this body, firmly held by the One who has conquered death and who carries us through death.

In the course of the centuries, the symbols were simplified, but the essential content of baptism has remained the same. It is no mere cleansing, still less is it a somewhat complicated initiation into a new association. It is death and resurrection, rebirth to new life.

Indeed, the cure for death does exist. Christ is the tree of life, once more within our reach. If we remain close to him, then we have life. Hence, during this night of resurrection, with all our hearts we shall sing the alleluia, the song of joy that has no need of words. Hence, Paul can say to the Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, rejoice!” (Phil 4:4). Joy cannot be commanded. It can only be given. The risen Lord gives us joy: true life. We are already held for ever in the love of the One to whom all power in heaven and on earth has been given (cf. Mt 28:18). In this way, confident of being heard, we make our own the Church’s Prayer over the Gifts from the liturgy of this night: Accept the prayers and offerings of your people. With your help may this Easter mystery of our redemption bring to perfection the saving work you have begun in us. Amen.

Holy Saturday, 3 April 2010