



The Holy See

37th WORLD YOUTH DAY

HOLY MASS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

Asti Cathedral

Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe - Sunday, 20 November 2022

[Multimedia]

We have seen this young man, Stefano, who has asked to receive the ministry of acolyte as part of his preparation for the priesthood. We should pray for him, so that he will persevere in his vocation and be faithful; but we should also pray for this Church of Asti, that the Lord will send priestly vocations, since, as you see, the majority are elderly, like myself: there is a need for young priests, like some of those here who are very fine. Let us ask the Lord to bless this land.

From these lands, my father set out as an immigrant to Argentina, and to these lands, rendered precious by the rich fruits of the soil and above all by the native industriousness of their people, I have now returned to rediscover and savour my roots. Today too, the Gospel brings us back *to the roots of our faith*. Those roots are planted in the barren soil of Calvary, where Jesus, like the seed that falls to the earth and dies, made hope spring up. Planted in the heart of the earth, he opened the way to heaven; by his death, he gave us eternal life; from the wood of the cross, he brought us the fruits of salvation. Let us then gaze upon him, the Crucified One.

On the cross, we see a single phrase: “This is the King of the Jews” (Lk 23:38). That is Jesus’ title: he is a king. Yet as we gaze upon him, our idea of a king is turned upside down. When we try to visualize a king, what comes to mind is a powerful man seated on a throne with magnificent insignia, a sceptre in his hand and precious rings on his fingers, speaking in solemn tones to his subjects. That, more or less, is what we imagine. Looking at Jesus, though, we see the complete

opposite. He is not comfortably enthroned, but hanging on a gibbet. The God who “casts down the mighty from their thrones” (*Lk 1:52*) appears as a slave executed by those in power. Appareled only with nails and thorns, stripped of everything yet rich in love, from his throne on the cross he no longer teaches the crowds by his words; he no longer lifts his hands as a teacher. He does more: pointing a finger at no one, he opens his arms to all. That is how he shows himself to be our king: with open arms, *a brasa aduerte*.

Only by entering into his embrace do we understand: we come to realize that God went to this extreme, even to the paradox of the cross, in order to embrace every one of us, no matter how far distant we may be from him: he embraces our death, our pain, our poverty, our weakness. He embraced all of it. He became a slave so that each of us could become a son. By his becoming a slave, he purchased our sonship. He let himself be insulted and derided, so that whenever we are brought low, we will never feel alone. He let himself be stripped of his garments, so that no one would ever feel stripped of his or her rightful dignity. He ascended the cross, so that God would be present in every crucified man or woman throughout history. This is our king, the king of the universe, for he journeyed to the furthest confines of our human experience, entered into the black hole of hatred, the black hole of abandonment, in order to bring light to every life and to embrace all reality. My brothers and sisters, this is the king whom today we acclaim! His is not a kingship easy to understand. And the question we ought to be asking is this: Is this king of the universe also the king of my life? Do I believe in him. How can I celebrate him as the Lord of all creation, unless he also becomes the Lord of my life? And you (*turning to Stefano*), who are setting out on the path to priesthood, don't forget that this is your model: don't cling to honours. Unless you are planning to be a priest like this king, it is better to stop now.

So let us look once more upon the crucified Jesus. Let us look at him. He does not look at our life only for a brief moment, or give us the same kind of fleeting glance that we so often give him. No, he stays there, *a brasa aduerte*, to say to you in silence that nothing about you is foreign to him, that he wants to embrace you, to lift you up and to save you just as you are, with your past history, your failings and your sins. “But Lord, is this true, that you love me with all my failings?” Right now, let us think about our own personal poverty: “Lord, do you love me with this spiritual poverty and all these limitations?” And the Lord smiles and makes us understand that he loves us and gave his life for us.

Let us think of our own limitations, but also of the good things. He loves us as we are, as we are right now. He gives us a chance to reign in this life, if only you surrender to his meek love that proposes but never imposes, a love that always forgives you. So often we tire of forgiving; we make the sign of the cross and turn our backs on that person. Jesus never tires of forgiving, never. He always sets you on your feet; he always restores your royal dignity. Where does salvation come from? It comes from letting ourselves be loved by him, for only in this way are we freed from slavery to ourselves, from the fear of being alone, from thinking that we cannot succeed. My brothers and sisters, let us often stand before the crucified Lord and allow ourselves to be loved,

because those *brasa aduerte* also open heaven to us, as they did to the good thief. Let us hear, addressed to us, the only words that Jesus today speaks from the cross: “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:43). That is what God wants to tell us whenever we let him gaze upon us. Then we realize that ours is not an “unknown God”, up in the heavens, powerful and distant, but rather a God who is close: closeness is God’s “style”, closeness with tenderness and mercy. Tenderness and compassion; his open arms console and caress us. That is our king!

Brothers and sisters, once we have gazed upon him, what can we do? Today’s Gospel sets before us two paths: faced with Jesus, there are those who become *onlookers* and others who *get involved*. The onlookers are many, the majority. Seeing someone die on a cross was a spectacle. The text tells us this: “The people stood by, watching” (v. 35). They were not bad people: many of them were believers, but at the sight of the crucified Lord they remain onlookers: they do not take a step forward towards Jesus, but look upon him from afar, curious yet indifferent, without really being interested, without asking themselves what they could do. They would have made their comments, expressed their judgements and opinions; some of them would have grieved, others considered him innocent, but all of them stood by and looked on, hand-in-hand, arms linked. Yet closer to the cross there were other onlookers: the leaders of the people, there to watch the grim spectacle of the ignominious end of the Christ; the soldiers, who hoped that the execution would be over quickly so they could go home; and one of the criminals, who releases all his rage. They mock, they jeer, they vent their anger.

All these onlookers share a refrain that the text repeats three times: “If you are a king, then save yourself!” (cf. vv. 35, 37, 39). *Save yourself!* That is how they insult him; they challenge him! It is precisely the opposite of what Jesus is doing: he thinks not of saving himself, but of saving them. Yet those insulting words – “save yourself!” – are contagious; they spread from the leaders to the soldiers and then to the people; the ripple of evil reaches almost everyone there. Think about it: evil is contagious. Like an infectious disease, we catch it immediately. All those people talk about Jesus, but not for a second do they empathize with him. They stand apart and talk.

Such is the lethal infection of indifference. “This has nothing to do with me.” Indifference to Jesus, indifference to the sick, the poor, the destitute of the land. I like to ask people, and I would now ask each of you: when you give money to the poor, do you look them in the eye. Do you do that? Do you simply throw them a coin, or do you touch their outstretched hand? Are you capable of touching human pain? Today let each of us answer that question.

Those people were indifferent. They talk about Jesus, but they do not empathize with him. This is the lethal infection of indifference; it stands aloof from the misery of others. The wave of evil always swells like this: it starts with standing apart, watching without doing anything, being unconcerned; then we think only of what has to do with us and we grow used to turning aside. It is also a danger for our faith, which withers if it remains merely a theory and is not put into practice, if we remain detached, aloof and uninvolved. Then we become “rosewater Christians”, as we used

to say at home. They say they believe in God and want peace, but neither pray nor care for their neighbor. Christians in name, shallow!

That was the evil way, there at Calvary. Yet there is another path: that of goodness. Amid all those onlookers, one person does get involved: the good thief. The others mock the Lord, but he turns to him and calls him by name: "Jesus". That is all he asks of the Lord. A fine prayer that each of us can recite daily as a path to holiness. "Jesus, remember me!" Many jeer at Jesus, but he confesses his faults to Jesus. Many shout: "Save yourself!", but he begs: "Jesus, remember me" (v. 42). In this way, a criminal becomes the first saint: he draws near to Jesus for an instant and the Lord keeps him at his side forever. The Gospel speaks of the good thief for our benefit: to invite us to overcome evil by refusing to remain as onlookers. Please, indifference is worse than evildoing. So where do we begin? With *trust*, with calling upon God by name, exactly as the good thief did. At the end of his life, he discovered anew the fearless confidence of children, who trust, and ask, and keep asking. In confidence and trust, he admits his faults; he weeps not for himself, but in the presence of the Lord. What about us? Do we have that same trust? Do we bring to Jesus what we hold in the depths of our hearts, or do we mask ourselves before God, perhaps even with a bit of ritual and incense? Please, this kind of "cosmetic" spirituality is tedious. Before God, our souls should be simple and unadorned, just the way they are; salvation comes from that. Those who practise confident trust, like the good thief, learn *to intercede*; they learn to bring to God what they see all around them, the sufferings of the world, the people they meet, and say to him, like the good thief: "Remember, Lord!" We are not in this world just to save ourselves, but to bring our brothers and sisters into the embrace of our king. Intercession, asking the Lord to remember, opens the gates of heaven. When we pray, do we intercede? "Lord, remember me, remember my family, remember this problem..." Attract the Lord's attention.

Brothers, sisters, today, from the cross, our king looks upon us *a brasa aduerte*. It is up to us to choose whether we will be *onlookers* or *involved*. What will I be? We see the crises of the present time, the decline of faith, the lack of participation... What are we to do? Are we content to theorize and criticize, or do we roll up our sleeves, take life in hand, and pass from taking refuge in excuses to the commitment of prayer and service? All of us think we know what is wrong with society, with the world, and with the Church. We talk about it all day long, but then what do we do? Do we soil our hands like our God, nailed to the cross? Or do we stand with hands in our pockets, as mere onlookers? Today, as Jesus, naked on the cross, unveils God and destroys every false image of his kingship, let us look to him and thus find the courage to look at ourselves, to follow the path of confident trust and intercession, and to make servants of ourselves, in order to reign with him. "Remember, Lord! Remember!" Let us make this more often our prayer. Thank you.