



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

to KAZAKHSTAN

(13 - 15 SEPTEMBER 2022)

HOLY MASS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS

“Expo grounds” (Nur-Sultan)

Wednesday, 14 September 2022

[Multimedia]

The cross is a gibbet of death. Yet today we celebrate the exaltation of the cross of Christ, for on its wood Jesus took upon himself all our sin and the evil of our world, and vanquished them by his love. That is why we celebrate today's Feast. The word of God that we have just heard tells us how, by contrasting serpents that bite with a serpent that saves. Let us reflect on these two images.

First, *serpents that bite*. These serpents attacked the people who had fallen once more into the sin of speaking against God. Such speaking against God was more than simply grumbling and complaining; on a deeper level, it was a sign that in their hearts the Israelites had lost their trust in him and his promises. As God's people were making their way through the desert towards the promised land, they grew weary and could no longer endure the journey (cf. *Num 21:4*). They grew discouraged; they lost hope, and, at a certain point, they even seemed to forget the Lord's promise. They lacked even the strength to believe that the Lord himself was guiding them towards a land of plenty.

It is no coincidence that, once the people no longer trusted in God, they were bitten by deadly serpents. We are reminded of the first serpent mentioned in the Bible, in the Book of Genesis: the

tempter, who poisoned the hearts of Adam and Eve and made them doubt God. The devil, in the form of a serpent, tricked them and sowed seeds of distrust in them, convincing them that God is not good, and is even envious of their freedom and happiness. Now, in the desert, serpents reappear, this time as “fiery serpents” (v. 6). In other words, original sin returns: the Israelites doubt God; they do not trust him; they complain and they rebel against the one who gave them life, and so they meet their death. That is where distrustful hearts end up!

Dear brothers and sisters, this first part of the narrative asks us to examine closely those moments in our own personal and community lives when our trust in the Lord and one another has failed. How often have we grown dry, disheartened and impatient in our own personal deserts, and lost sight of our journey’s goal! Here too, in this vast country, there is a desert. For all its great natural beauty, it can also remind us of the weariness and aridity that we at times bear in our hearts. Moments of fatigue and trial, when we no longer have the strength to look up towards God. Situations in our lives when, as individuals, as Church and as a society, we can be bitten by the *serpent of distrust*, poisoned by disillusionment and despair, pessimism and resignation, and caught up only with ourselves, lacking all enthusiasm.

Yet this land has experienced other kinds of painful “bites” in its history. I think of the fiery serpents of violence, atheistic persecution and all those troubled times when people’s freedom was threatened and their dignity offended. We do well to keep alive the memory of those sufferings and not forget certain grim moments; otherwise, we can consider them water under the bridge and think that now, once and for all, we are on the right road. No. Peace is never achieved once and for all; like integral development, social justice and the harmonious coexistence of different ethnic groups and religious traditions, it must be achieved anew each day. Commitment is demanded on the part of all if Kazakhstan is to keep growing in “fraternity, dialogue and understanding... building bridges of solidarity and cooperation with other peoples, nations and cultures” (SAINT JOHN PAUL II, [*Address at the Welcome Ceremony*](#), 22 September 2001). Yet even before that, we need to renew our faith in the Lord: to look upwards, to look to him and to learn from his universal and crucified love.

And so we come to the second image: the *serpent that saves*. As the people are dying from the fiery serpents, God hears Moses’ prayer of intercession and tells him: “Make a fiery serpent and put it on a pole. If anyone is bitten and looks at it, he shall live” (*Num* 21:8). And indeed, “if anyone was bitten by a serpent, he looked at the bronze serpent and lived” (v. 9). Yet, we might ask: Why did God not simply destroy those poisonous serpents instead of giving these detailed instructions to Moses? God’s way of acting reveals to us his way of dealing with evil, sin and distrust on the part of humanity. Then, as now, in the great spiritual battle that continues throughout history, God does not destroy the vile and worthless things that men and women choose to pursue. Poisonous serpents do not disappear; they are always there, lying in wait, ever ready to bite. What *has* changed then, what does God do?

Jesus tells us in the Gospel: “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (*Jn* 3:14-15). This is the decisive shift: the serpent that saves has now come among us. Jesus, lifted up on the pole of the cross, does not allow the poisonous serpents that attack us to cause our death. Confronting our misery, God gives us a new horizon: if we keep our gaze fixed on Jesus, the sting of evil can no longer prevail over us, for on the cross he took upon himself the venom of sin and death, and crushed their destructive power. That was the Father’s response to the spread of evil in the world: he gave us Jesus, who drew near to us in a way we could never have imagined. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin” (*2 Cor* 5:21). Such is the infinite grandeur of divine mercy: Jesus “became sin” for our sake. Jesus, we could say, on the cross “became a serpent”, so that by gazing upon him we might resist the poisonous bites of the evil serpents that assail us.

Brothers and sisters, this is the path, the path to our salvation, our rebirth and our resurrection: to behold the crucified Jesus. From the heights of the cross, we can view our life and the history of our peoples in a new way. For from the cross of Christ we learn love, not hatred; compassion, not indifference; forgiveness, not vengeance. The outstretched arms of Jesus are the embrace of tender love with which God wishes to embrace us. They show us the fraternal love that we are called to have for one another and for everyone. They show us the way, the Christian way. It is not the way of imposition and force, of power and status; it never brandishes the cross of Christ against our brothers and sisters for whom he gave his life! Jesus’ way, the way of salvation is different: it is the way of a humble gratuitous and universal love, with no “ifs”, “ands” or “buts”.

Yes, for on the wood of the cross Christ removed the venom from the serpent of evil. Being a Christian, then, means *living without venom*: not biting one another, not complaining, blaming and backbiting, not disseminating evil, not polluting the earth with the sin and distrust that comes from the evil one. Brothers and sisters, we have been reborn from the pierced side of the crucified Jesus. May we be free of the poison of death (cf. *Wis* 1:14), and pray that by God’s grace we can become ever more fully Christian: joyful witnesses of new life, love and peace.

Words of Thanks at the Conclusion of Holy Mass

Thank you, Archbishop Peta, for your kind words. Thank you too for all the effort that went into the preparation for this celebration and for my Visit. I also renew the expression of my heartfelt gratitude to the civil and religious authorities of the country. I greet all of you, brothers and sisters, and in particular those of you who have come from other countries of Central Asia and from the distant parts of this vast land. With great affection, I bless the elderly and the sick, the children and the young people.

Today, on this Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, we feel spiritually united to the National

Sanctuary of the Queen of Peace in Oziornoje. Bishop Tomash reminded us of its great cross, inscribed with the words: “Gratitude to the People of Kazakhstan” and “Peace to Mankind”. Gratitude to the Lord for the holy people of God living in this great country, joined to gratitude for its commitment to promoting dialogue, becomes a plea for peace, the peace for which our world so deeply yearns.

My thoughts turn to all the war-torn areas of our world, and particularly beloved Ukraine. May we never grow accustomed to war, or resigned to its inevitability. Let us come to the aid of those who suffer and insist that genuine efforts be made to achieve peace. What still needs to happen, and how many deaths will it still take, before conflict yields to dialogue for the good of people, nations and all humanity? The one solution is peace and the only way to arrive at peace is through dialogue. I am troubled to learn that in these very hours there have been new outbreaks of tension in the Caucasus region. Let us continue to pray that, in these lands too, peaceful discussions and concord will prevail over disagreements. May our world learn how to build peace, not least by limiting the arms race and converting the enormous sums spent on war into concrete assistance to peoples. I thank all those who believe in this; I thank all of you, and all those men and women who are heralds of peace and unity!