



The Holy See

CELEBRATION OF PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

*St Peter's Square
Sunday, 2 April 2023*

[Multimedia]

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (*Mt 27:46*). This is the cry that today’s liturgy has us repeat in the responsorial psalm (cf. *Ps 22:2*), the only cry that Jesus makes from the cross in the Gospel we have heard. Those words bring us to the very heart of Christ’s passion, the culmination of the sufferings he endured for our salvation. “Why have you forsaken me?”.

The sufferings of Jesus were many, and whenever we listen to the account of the Passion, they pierce our hearts. There were *sufferings of the body*: let us think of the slaps and beatings, the flogging and the crowning with thorns, and in the end, the cruelty of the crucifixion. There were also *sufferings of the soul*: the betrayal of Judas, the denials of Peter, the condemnation of the religious and civil authorities, the mockery of the guards, the jeering at the foot of the cross, the rejection of the crowd, utter failure and the flight of the disciples. Yet, amid all these sorrows, Jesus remained certain of one thing: the closeness of the Father. Now, however, the unthinkable has taken place. Before dying, he cries out: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” The forsakenness of Jesus.

This is the most searing of all sufferings, *the suffering of the spirit*. At his most tragic hour, Jesus experiences abandonment by God. Prior to that moment, he had never called the Father by his generic name, “God”. To convey the impact of this, the Gospel also reports his words in Aramaic. These are the only words of Jesus from the cross that have come down to us in the original language. The real event is the extreme abasement, being forsaken by the Father, forsaken by God. We find it hard even to grasp what great suffering he embraced out of love for us. He sees the gates of heaven close, he finds himself at the bitter edge, the shipwreck of life, the collapse of

certainty. And he cries out: “Why?” A “why” that embraces every other “why” ever spoken. “Why, God?”.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In the Bible, the word “forsake” is powerful. We hear it at moments of extreme pain: love that fails, or is rejected or betrayed; children who are rejected and aborted; situations of repudiation, the lot of widows and orphans; broken marriages, forms of social exclusion, injustice and oppression; the solitude of sickness. In a word, in the drastic severing of the bonds that unite us to others. There, this word is spoken: “abandonment”. Christ brought all of this to the cross; upon his shoulders, he bore the sins of the world. And at the supreme moment, Jesus, the only-begotten, beloved Son of the Father, experienced a situation utterly alien to his very being: abandonment, the distance of God.

Why did it have to come to this? *He did it for us.* There is no other answer. For us. Brothers and sisters, today this is not merely a show. Every one of us, hearing of Jesus’ abandonment, can say: *for me.* This abandonment is the price he paid for me. He became one with each of us in order to be completely and definitively one with us *to the very end.* He experienced abandonment in order not to leave us prey to despair, in order to stay at our side forever. He did this for me, for you, because whenever you or I or anyone else seems pinned to the wall, lost in a blind alley, plunged into the abyss of abandonment, sucked into a whirlwind of so many “whys” without an answer, there can still be a hope: Jesus himself, for you, for me. It is not the end, because Jesus was there and even now, he is at your side. He endured the distance of abandonment in order to take up into his love every possible distance that we can feel. So that each of us might say: in my failings, and each of us has failed many times, in my desolation, whenever I feel betrayed or betrayed others, whenever I feel cast aside or have cast aside others, whenever I feel forsaken or have abandoned others, let us think of Jesus, who was abandoned, betrayed and cast aside. There, we find him. When I feel lost and confused, when I feel that I can’t go on, he is beside me. Amid all my unanswered questions “why...?”, he is there.

That is how the Lord saves us, from within our questioning “why?” From within that questioning, he opens the horizon of hope that does not disappoint. On the cross, even as he felt utter abandonment – this is the ultimate end – Jesus refused to yield to despair; instead, he prayed and trusted. He cried out his “why?” in the words of the Psalm (22:2), and commended himself into the hands of the Father, despite how distant he felt him to be (cf. *Lk 23:46*) or rather, whom he did not feel, for instead he felt himself abandoned. In the hour of his abandonment, Jesus continued to trust. At the hour of abandonment, he continued to love his disciples who had fled, leaving him alone. In his abandonment he forgave those who crucified him (v. 34). Here we see the abyss of our many evils immersed in a greater love, with the result that our isolation becomes fellowship.

Brothers and sisters, a love like this, embracing us totally and to the very end, the love of Jesus, can turn our stony hearts into hearts of flesh. His is a love of mercy, tenderness and compassion. This is God’s style: closeness, compassion and tenderness. God is like this. Christ, in his

abandonment, stirs us to seek him and to love him and those who are themselves abandoned. For in them we see not only people in need, but Jesus himself, abandoned: Jesus, who saved us by descending to the depths of our human condition. He is with each of them, abandoned even to death... I think of the German so-called "street person", who died under the colonnade, alone and abandoned. He is Jesus for each of us. So many need our closeness, so many are abandoned. I too need Jesus to caress me and draw close to me, and for this reason I go to find him in the abandoned, in the lonely. He wants us to care for our brothers and sisters who resemble him most, those experiencing extreme suffering and solitude. Today, dear brothers and sisters, their numbers are legion. Entire peoples are exploited and abandoned; the poor live on our streets and we look the other way; there are migrants who are no longer faces but numbers; there are prisoners who are disowned; people written off as problems. Countless other abandoned persons are in our midst, invisible, hidden, discarded with white gloves: unborn children, the elderly who live alone: they could perhaps be your father or mother, your grandfather or grandmother, left alone in retirement homes, the sick whom no one visits, the disabled who are ignored, and the young burdened by great interior emptiness, with no one prepared to listen to their cry of pain. And they find no path other than suicide. The abandoned of our day. The "Christs" of our day.

Jesus, in his abandonment, asks us to open our eyes and hearts to all who find themselves abandoned. For us, as disciples of the "forsaken" Lord, no man, woman or child can be regarded as an outcast, no one left to himself or herself. Let us remember that the rejected and the excluded are living icons of Christ: they remind us of his reckless love, his forsakenness that delivers us from every form of loneliness and isolation. Brothers and sisters, today let us implore this grace: to love Jesus in his abandonment and to love Jesus in the abandoned all around us. Let us ask for the grace to see and acknowledge the Lord who continues to cry out in them. May we not allow his voice to go unheard amid the deafening silence of indifference. God has not left us alone; let us care, then, for those who feel alone and abandoned. Then, and only then, will we be of one mind and heart with the one who, for our sake, "emptied himself" (*Phil 2:7*). He emptied himself completely for us.