

**“It is above all in the Sacrament of forgiveness and reconciliation that the power of the redeeming Blood of Christ is made effective in our personal lives”**

*THE HOMILY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II AT THE MASS IN A FIELD AT WESTOVER HILLS IN SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS, ON SEPTEMBER 13<sup>TH</sup>*

“My soul, give thanks to the Lord; all my being, bless His holy name” (*Ps.* 102/103:1).

Dear brothers and sisters,  
Dear friends, citizens of San Antonio  
and of the state of Texas,

It gives me an immense joy to be with you on this Sunday morning and to invoke God’s blessings upon this vast state and upon the whole Church in this region.

Texas! The name immediately brings to mind the rich history and cultural development of this part of the United States. In this marvelous setting, overlooking the city of San Antonio, I cannot but reverently evoke the memory of the Franciscan Fr. Massanet who, on the feast of St. Anthony of Padua, June 13th, 1691 celebrated Mass along the banks of the San Antonio River for the members of an early Spanish expedition and a group of local Indian people.

Since then, people of many different origins have come here, so that today yours is a multicultural society, striving for the fullness of harmony and collaboration among all. I express my cordial gratitude to the representatives of the state of Texas and the city of San Antonio who have wished to be present at this moment of prayer. I also greet the members of the various Christian communions who join us in praising the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. A special word of thanks to Archbishop Flores and to the Bishops, priests, deacons, Religious and all the Catholic faithful of Texas. The peace of Christ be with you all!

Today is Sunday: the Lord’s day. Today is like the “seventh day” about which the *Book of Genesis* says that “God rested from all the work He had undertaken” (*Gen.* 2:2). Having completed the work of creation, He “rested.” God rejoiced in His work; He “looked at everything that He had made, and He found it very good” (*Gen.* 1:31). “So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy” (*Gen.* 2:3).

On this day we are called to, reflect more deeply on the mystery of creation, and therefore of our own lives. We are called to “rest” in God, the Creator of the universe. Our duty is to praise Him: “My soul give thanks to the Lord...give thanks to the Lord and never forget all His blessings” (*Ps.* 102/103:1-2). This is a task for each human being. Only the human person created in the image and likeness of God is capable of raising a hymn of praise and thanksgiving to the Creator. The earth, with all its creatures, and the entire universe, call on man to be their voice. Only the human person is capable of releasing from the depths of his or her being that hymn of praise, proclaimed without words by all creation: “My soul, give thanks to the Lord; all my being, bless His holy name” (v. 1)

What is the message of today’s liturgy? To us gathered here in San Antonio, in the state of Texas, and taking part in the Eucharistic Sacrifice of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, St. Paul addresses these words: “None of us lives as his own master, and none of us dies as his own master. While we live we are responsible to the Lord, and when we die we die as His servants. Both in life and death we are the Lord’s (*Rom.* 14:7-8)

These words are concise, but filled with a moving message. “We live” and “we die.” We live in this material world that surrounds us, limited by the horizons of our earthly journey through time. We live in this moment, with the inevitable prospect of death, right from the moment of conception and of birth. And yet, we must look beyond the material aspect of our earthly existence. Certainly, bodily death is a necessary passage for us all; but it is also true that what from its very beginning has borne in itself the image and likeness of God cannot be completely given back to the corruptible matter of the universe. This is a fundamental truth and attitude of our Christian faith. In St. Paul’s terms: “While we live we are responsible to the Lord, and when we die we die as His servants.” We live *for* the Lord, and our dying too is life in the Lord.

Today, on this Lord’s day. I wish to invite all those who are listening In my words, not to forget our immortal destiny: life after death – the eternal happiness of Heaven, or the awful possibility of eternal punishment, eternal separation from God, in what the Christian tradition has called Hell (cf. *Mt.* 25:41; 22:13; 25:30). There can be no truly Christian living without an openness to this transcendent dimension of our lives. “Both in life and death we are the Lord’s” (*Rom.* 14:8)

The Eucharist that we celebrate constantly confirms our living and dying “in the Lord”: “Dying you destroyed our death, rising you restored our life.” In fact, St. Paul wrote: “We are the Lord’s. That is why Christ died and came to life again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living” (*Rom.* 14: 8-9). Yes, Christ is the Lord! The Paschal Mystery has transformed our human existence, so that it is no longer under the dominion of death. In Jesus Christ our Redeemer, “we live for the Lord” and “we die for the Lord.” Through Him and with Him and in Him, we belong to God in life and in death. We exist not only “for death” but “for God.” For this reason, on this day “made by the Lord” (*Ps.* 118/119:24), the Church all over the world speaks her blessing from the very depths of the Paschal Mystery of Christ: “My soul, give thanks to the Lord; all my being bless His holy name. Give thanks ... and never forget all His blessings” (*Ps.* 102/103:1-2).

“Never forget”! Today’s reading from the *Gospel According to St. Matthew* gives us an example of a man who has forgotten (cf. *Mt.* 18:21-35). He has forgotten ten favors given by his lord – and consequently he has shown himself to be cruel and heartless in regard to his fellow human being. In his way the liturgy introduces us to the experience of sin as it has developed from the beginning of the history of man alongside the experience of death.

We die in the physical body when all the energies of life are extinguished. We die through sin when love dies in us. Outside of love there is no life. If a man opposes love and lives without love, death takes root in his soul and grows. For this reason Christ cries out: “I give you a new commandment: Love one another. Such as my love has been for you, so must your love be for each other” (*Jn.* 13:34). The cry for love is the cry for life, for the victory of the soul over sin and death. The source of this victory is the Cross of Jesus Christ: His death and His Resurrection.

Again, in the Eucharist, our lives are touched by Christ’s own radical victory over sin – sin which is the death of the soul, and – ultimately – the reason for bodily death. “That is

why Christ died and came to life again, that He might give life again to those who are dead in He might be Lord of the dead” (cf. Rom. 14:9) – that He might give life again to those who, are dead in sin or because of sin.

And so, the Eucharist begins with the Penitential Rite. We confess our sins in order to obtain forgiveness through the Cross of Christ, and so receive a part in His Resurrection from the dead. But if our conscience reproaches us with mortal sin, our taking part in the Mass can be fully fruitful only if beforehand we receive absolution in the Sacrament of Penance.

The ministry of reconciliation is a fundamental part of the Church’s life and mission. Without overlooking any of many ways in which Christ’s victory over sin becomes a reality in the life of the Church and of the world, it is important for me to emphasize that it is above all in the Sacrament, of forgiveness and reconciliation that the power of the redeeming Blood of Christ is made effective in our personal lives.

In different parts of the world there is a great neglect of the Sacrament of Penance. This is sometimes linked to an obscuring of the religious and moral conscience, a loss of the sense of sin, or a lack of adequate instruction on the importance of this Sacrament in the life of Christ’s Church. At times the neglect occurs because we fail to take seriously our lack of love and justice, and God’s corresponding offer of reconciling mercy. Sometimes there is a hesitation or an unwillingness to accept maturely and responsibly the consequences of the objective truths of faith. For these reasons it is necessary to emphasize once again that “with regard to the substance of the Sacrament there has always remained firm and unchanged in the consciousness of the Church the certainty that, by the will of Christ, forgiveness is offered to each individual by means of sacramental absolution given by the ministers of Penance” (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 30).

Again I ask all my brother Bishops and priests to do everything possible to make the administration of this Sacrament a primary aspect of their service to God’s people. There can be no substitute for the means of grace which Christ Himself has placed in our hands. The Second Vatican Council never intended that this Sacrament of Penance be less practiced; what the Council expressly asked for was that the faithful might more easily understand the sacramental signs and more eagerly and *frequently* have recourse to the Sacrament (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 59). And just as sin deeply touches the individual conscience, so we understand why the absolution of sins must be individual and not collective, except in extraordinary circumstances as approved by the Church.

I ask you, dear Catholic brothers and sisters, not to see Confession as a mere attempt at psychological liberation – however legitimate this too might be – but as a Sacrament, a liturgical act. Confession is an act of honesty and courage; in an act of entrusting ourselves, beyond sin, to the mercy of a loving and forgiving God. It is an act of the prodigal son who returns to his Father and is welcomed by Him with the kiss of peace. It is easy, therefore, to understand why “every confessional is a special and blessed place from which there is born new and uncontaminated a reconciled individual – a reconciled world!” (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 31, V; cf. III).

The potential for an authentic and vibrant renewal of the whole Catholic Church through the more faithful use of the Sacrament of Penance is immeasurable. It flows directly from the loving heart of God Himself! This is a certainty of faith which I offer to each one of you and to the entire Church in the United States.

To those who have been far away from the Sacrament of reconciliation and forgiving love I make this appeal: come back to this source of grace; do not be afraid! Christ Himself is waiting for you. He will heal you, and you will be at peace with God!

To all the young people of the Church, I extend a special invitation to receive Christ's forgiveness and His strength in the Sacrament of Penance. It is a mark of greatness to be able to say: I have made a mistake; I have sinned, Father; I have offended you, my God; I am sorry; I ask for pardon; I will try again, because I rely on your strength and I believe in your love. And I know that the power of your Son's Paschal Mystery – the death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ – is greater than my weaknesses and all the sins of the world. I will come and confess my sins and be healed, and I will live in your love!

In Jesus Christ the world has truly known the mystery of forgiveness, mercy, and reconciliation, which is proclaimed by God's word this day. At the same time, God's inexhaustible mercy to us obliges us to be reconciled among ourselves. This makes practical demands on the Church in Texas and the Southwest of the United States. It means bringing hope and love wherever there is division and alienation.

Your history registers a meeting of cultures, indigenous and immigrant, sometimes marked by tensions and conflict, yet constantly moving toward reconciliation and harmony. People of different races and languages, colors and customs, have come to this land to make it their home. Together with the indigenous peoples of these territories, there are the descendants of those who came from almost every country in Europe: from Spain and France, from Germany and Belgium from Italy, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, from Ireland, England, and Scotland. And even from my own native Poland – for it was to Texas, and Panna Maria, that the first Polish immigrant came to the United States. There are descendants of those who came in chains from Africa; those from Lebanon, the Philippines, and Vietnam, and from every Latin American country, especially from Mexico.

This land is a crossroads, standing at the border of two great nations, and experiencing both the enrichment and the complications which arise from this circumstance. You are thus a symbol and a kind of laboratory testing America's commitment for her founding moral principles and human values. These principles and values are now being reaffirmed by America, as she celebrates the Bicentennial of her Constitution and speaks once more about justice and freedom, and about the acceptance of diversity within a fundamental unity – a unity arising from a shared vision of the dignity of every human person, and a shared responsibility for the welfare of all, especially of the needy and the persecuted.

Against this background, one may speak of a current phenomenon here and elsewhere – the movement of people northward, not only from Mexico but from other southern neighbors of the United States. On this matter also there is work of reconciliation to be

done. Among you there are people of great courage and generosity who have been doing much on behalf of suffering brothers and sisters arriving from the south. They have sought to show compassion in the face of complex human, social, and political realities. Here human needs, both spiritual and material, continue to call out to the Church with thousands of voices, and the whole Church must respond by the proclamation of God's word and by selfless deeds of service. Here too there is ample space for continuing and growing collaboration among members of the various Christian communions. In all of this, the Hispanic community itself faces the greatest challenge. Those of you of Hispanic descent – so numerous, so long present in this land, so well equipped to respond – are called to hear the word of Christ and take it to heart: “I give you a new commandment: love one another. Such as my love has been for you, so must your love be for each other” (*Jn.* 13:34). And Jesus specified that this love embraces the entire range of human needs from the least to the greatest: “I promise you that whoever gives a cup of cold water to one of these lowly ones . . . will not want for his reward” (*Mt.* 10:42). The Hispanic community also needs to respond to its own needs, and so show generous and effective solidarity among its members. I urge you to hold fast to your Christian faith and traditions, especially in defense of the family. And I pray that the Lord may provide many more vocations to the priesthood and to the Religious life among your people. May you who have received so much from God hear the call to a renewal of your Christian life and to fidelity to the faith of your fathers. May you respond in the spirit of Mary, the Virgin Mother whom the Church sees “maternally present and sharing in the many complicated problems which today beset the lives of individuals, families, and nations . . . helping the Christian people in the constant struggle between good and evil, to ensure that it ‘does not fall,’ or if it has fallen, that it ‘rises again’” (*Redemptoris Mater*, 52).

Today's liturgy helps us to reflect deeply on life and death, on the victory of life over death. On this earth, in the visible world of creation, man exists “for death”; and yet, in Christ, he is called to communion with God, with the living God who “gives life.” He is called to this communion precisely through the death of Christ – the death which “gives life.”

Today, all over the world, countless people – people of many countries and continents, languages and races – are sharing sacramentally in the death of Christ. We, here in Texas, journey together with them toward the fulfillment of the Paschal Mystery in life. We journey, conscious of being sinners, conscious of being mortal. But we journey on in hope, in union with the Sacrifice of Christ, through Eucharistic Communion with Him and with love for each other. We live for the Lord! We die for the Lord! We belong to the Lord! Come, Lord Jesus! (*cf. Rev.* 22:20). Amen.