Pope Francis on Palm Sunday: Lift your eyes to the cross in Holy Week....

Pope Francis urged Catholics to focus on the cross during Holy Week as he celebrated Mass on Palm Sunday.

Offering Mass at the Altar of the Chair March 28, the pope said that Holy Week was an opportunity to rediscover “amazement” at Christ’s saving Passion.

“During this Holy Week, let us lift our eyes to the cross, in order to receive the grace of amazement,” he said.

For a second consecutive year, attendance at the papal Palm Sunday Mass at St. Peter’s Basilica was tightly restricted due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The congregation consisted of around 120 people, holding palm leaves and booklets containing the Order of Mass. Approximately 30 cardinals were also present.

In his homily, the pope reflected on Christ's triumphal entry in Jerusalem, when Jesus was greeted by crowds bearing palms.

"His people give him a solemn welcome, yet he enters Jerusalem on a lowly colt. His people expect a powerful liberator at Passover, yet he comes to bring the Passover to fulfillment by sacrificing himself. His people are hoping to triumph over the Romans by the sword, but Jesus comes to celebrate God's triumph through the cross," he said.

"What happened to those people who in a few days' time went from shouting 'Hosanna' to crying out 'Crucify him'? What happened? They were following an idea of the Messiah rather than the Messiah. They admired Jesus, but they did not let themselves be amazed by him."

The pope said that today many people also admire Jesus for his life and teaching, but that "to admire Jesus is not enough."

"What is most amazing about the Lord and his Passover?" he asked. "It is the fact that he achieves glory through humiliation. He triumphs by accepting suffering and death, things that we, in our quest for admiration and success, would rather avoid. Jesus -- as St. Paul tells us -- 'emptied himself… he humbled himself' (Philippians 2:7-8)."

"This is the amazing thing: to see the Almighty reduced to nothing. To see the Word who knows all things teach us in silence from the height of the cross. To see the King of Kings enthroned on a gibbet. Seeing the God of the universe stripped of everything and crowned with thorns instead of glory. To see the One who is goodness personified, insulted and beaten."

He continued: "Why all this humiliation? Why, Lord, did you wish to endure all this? Jesus did it for us, to plumb the depths of our human experience, our entire existence, all our evil. To draw

near to us and not abandon us in our suffering and our death. To redeem us, to save us. Jesus was lifted high on the cross in order to descend to the abyss of our suffering."

After the Passion, human beings are never alone, the pope explained.

"God is at our side in every affliction, in every fear; no evil, no sin will ever have the final word. God triumphs, but the palm of victory passes through the wood of the cross. For the palm and the cross are inseparable," he said.

"Let us ask for the grace to be amazed. A Christian life without amazement becomes dreary."

The pope said that his namesake St. Francis of Assisi was surprised that his friars did not cry when they meditated on the crucifixion.

"What about us? Can we still be moved by God's love? Have we lost the ability to be amazed by him? Maybe our faith has grown dull from habit. Maybe we remain trapped in our regrets and allow ourselves to be crippled by our disappointments. Maybe we have lost all our trust or even feel worthless," he said.

"But behind all these 'maybes' lies the fact that we are not open to the gift of the Spirit who gives us the grace of amazement."

The pope urged people facing this struggle to "start over from amazement"

"Let us gaze upon Jesus on the cross and say to him: 'Lord, how much you love me! How precious I am to you!' Let us be amazed by Jesus so that we can start living again, for the grandeur of life lies not in possessions and asserting oneself, but in realizing that we are loved."

Pope's Holy Week Schedule

Papal liturgies throughout Holy Week will be much smaller than usual due to the ongoing pandemic.

On Holy Thursday, the pope will preside over the Chrism Mass in St. Peter’s Basilica on the morning of April 1. But he will not be present at the Vatican’s Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord’s Supper. Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, the Dean of the College of Cardinals, will preside instead.

Good Friday at the Vatican will include both the papal liturgy of the Passion of the Lord at 6 p.m. local time and the Stations of the Cross with Pope Francis at 9 p.m. in St. Peter’s Square.

The pope will offer the Easter Vigil Mass on April 3 in St. Peter’s Basilica at 7:30 p.m. and will also celebrate the Easter Sunday Mass at 10 a.m. after which he will offer the traditional Urbi et Orbi blessing.

Concluding his Palm Sunday homily, Pope Francis said: “Today God continues to fill our minds and hearts with amazement. Let us be filled with that amazement as we gaze upon the crucified Lord. May we too say: ‘You are truly the Son of God. You are my God.’”

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