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Homily, Good Friday Service 2022, Mwangaza Retreat House

“Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”

I must confess to you today, brothers and sisters, that I struggle greatly to accept the cross of Christ. I question why Jesus’ life had to come to this. Catholic Christianity is the only religion in the world that celebrates the death of its Savior. Islam celebrates Muhammed’s ascent into heaven. Buddhists imitate the Buddha’s attainment of enlightenment. Even Protestants do not celebrate Jesus’ death the way that we Catholics do. In fact, the Catholic tradition has made the cross the central religious symbol of our Faith. We see Jesus on the cross every day in every Church, in every house, we begin every prayer with it. Yet, we have become so familiar with the image that we lose a sense of the terrible mystery of the cross. I must admit to you that I do not like looking at the cross. What I see is the, *“man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity,”* but what I feel is aversion because my life has been rather different. I have been a man of comfort, accustomed to pleasures.

The cross of Jesus represents the opposite of everything that we humans normally take to be good and to be promoted. Think of it for a moment. We praise personal freedom, yet Jesus is bound and led away as a captive. We promote justice in society, yet Jesus is unjustly condemned to death. We seek our own comfort and avoid suffering, yet Jesus is cruelly tortured, scourged and crucified. We seek the honor and esteem of others, yet Jesus is rejected, *“one of those from whom people hide their faces, spurned, and we held him in no esteem.”*

So when I stand before the hideous suffering of the cross I flinch and draw away. It is a reality foreign to my world, and my being revolts against it. I think I would have been more at home as a Muslim or a Buddhist than a Catholic. Yet, it is in this revulsion before the cross that I question my whole life and the reality of my world. ‘Am I missing something? Are things not as I see them to be? Is God something different from what I supposed? Following St. Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians, in the folly of the cross I search for the wisdom of God. What is this wisdom?

So, where is the wisdom of the cross? Where can we look for it?

Maybe the best way to answer this question is to investigate *why* Jesus undergoes such a terrible death. We know that Jesus could have escaped at any time. The divine power and majesty, which could have saved Jesus, hides behind the human nature, but it is always there. He even tells Pilate that if he had so chosen, the subjects of his kingdom would have fought to protect him from the chief priests. So Jesus undergoes the cross voluntarily. But why?

We find the interpretive key to unlock the mystery in the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, “*Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*” (Jn. 15:13) Jesus was acting out of love. That is why he endured the cross. But what is this act of love? What is the *Upendo wa Yesu* [love of Jesus] that we speak of so often?

Love is an act of affirmation. It is an exclamation: It is good that you exist! The one who loves rejoices in the good that she is and *desires* to attain for the loved one her needs. And in this affirmation there is an union in the affections. When we love someone, we think of that person, we keep that person in mind, we even feel affection and care for that person in our hearts when he is far away. The loved one is present to us in our thoughts and affections.

So, when Jesus says he loves us, *Upendo wa Yesu* [love of Jesus], He affirms our existence. It is good that you exist. Jesus thinks on us, keeps us in mind, and feels affection and care for us. We become present to Him. He places us *in Him*, in His most Sacred Heart. His love unites us to Himself. Our lives then become His concern, His care. His love drives Him to do whatever he can for our sakes, overcoming all self-love, all selfishness, in sacrificing his life for ours. The good of our lives is more important to Him than his own life.

That is love. But why suffering, why death?

Do you remember what we were taught in our Catechism classes? Jesus died *for our sins*. Our sins, as acts of disobedience, separate us from God. When we are separated from the source of life, we fall into the grip of death. We see much death in the world today. If Jesus loves us, cares for our needs, then he must deal with our state of slavery to sin and death. So, he offers himself

to His father on our behalf. Just as we should have given our lives in service to God, who gave us our lives in the first place, Jesus gives our lives to God in union with His life.

The Father looks down on us and says, ‘these have sinned, they have not obeyed my ways.’ But Jesus replies on the cross, ‘Father, look not to their disobedience, but to my obedience. They are *in me* because I love them. Therefore, my obedience is theirs, and their disobedience is hidden by my love.’ The Father then accepts Jesus’ life and *our lives in union with His*, thus cancelling out the separation of sin.

This is the meaning of the letter to the Hebrews, “*Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.*”

Jesus showed His perfect obedience to the Father in His suffering, which was a loving sacrifice for us. Therefore, because we are united to Jesus in love, in the death of Christ we are reconciled to the Father. This is the wisdom of the cross. This should shock us, and humble us.

Sisters and brothers, I don’t know about you, but when I think of what love Jesus has for me, I think that he is wrong. My life is not worth his suffering and death. I am not worthy of His love. Yet, as St. Paul says, *God proves His love for us in that, when we were still sinners, Christ died for us* (Rom. 5:8). He died for me not because I am worthy, but because His love is enough.

The words of the Good Friday hymn should move our hearts,

*My Song is Love Unknown
My Savior’s love for Me
Love to the Loveless shown
That they might lovely be.
O who am I,
That for my sake
My Lord should take
Frail flesh and die?*

What must we do, then, brothers and sisters, in light of the wisdom of the cross? We must receive and respond. First, we must receive Jesus' love, so radical, so sacrificial. But this can be very difficult. It requires that we die to ourselves, to our own pride, to our own self-sufficiency, even to our attachments. We must let the love of Jesus on the cross save us, because we cannot save ourselves. Receive. Be loved. This is another reason why I struggle with the cross, because I struggle to receive His radical love.

Then we must respond, respond with love for Him. If He laid down his life for us, we must lay down our lives for Him. We must make our lives an act of sacrificial love for Him. We should keep Him in mind, care for His will, unite Him in our hearts, and suffer for Him. And it is in this suffering that our love is perfected. That is the wisdom of the cross. In a world full of injustice, violence, war, crime, hatred, Jesus asks us to respond with love and to suffer with Him in the midst of it. Unite our crosses with His cross. Unite the injustices we face with His. Unite the pain others inflict upon us with His pain. Only love can give us the strength in our sufferings. Love is stronger than the might of kings. Love is more powerful than any torture. Love witnesses to a reality that transcends all human evil. The cross is the path *through human suffering to new life in the resurrection*. Because God chose not to destroy human evil and suffering, but to transform it. Thus, the wisdom of the cross replaces the logic of evil.

That is why we celebrate the cross of Christ today and every day. The cross is the wisdom of God. We must receive the *Upendo wa Yesu* [love of Jesus], suffering for us on the cross, and then respond to the *Upendo wa Yesu* [love of Jesus] by laying down our lives for Him.

Appendix:

Moreover, we must recall how bloody and cruel Jesus' suffering and death were. This was no humane execution of a prisoner, swift and dignified. This was a cruelty that we do not see in the natural world. Sometimes you hear people say, 'he is as savage as an animal', but the truth is that such a statement is an insult to the animals. No lion is as malicious as the chief priests. No hippopotamus is as aggressive as the Roman soldiers. No crocodile kills its victims with such cruelty as the torture of the cross. Human evil has no comparative in the animal world.